Hugo Noël Santander Ferreira is a Colombian novelist and educator whose work examines how violence, intimacy, memory, and desire intertwine in contemporary Latin America. Born in Bucaramanga, he writes with psychological depth and unflinching clarity.

He is the author of the multi-volume saga From the Viaduct, which includes A Kyrgyz Spring, recognized for portraying the hidden wars within families, relationships, and the human psyche.

Santander Ferreira holds an MFA from Temple University and has worked across five continents, eleven cities, and nine countries as a teacher, linguist, and cultural promoter. His writing reflects how private lives echo historical trauma and how global experience reshapes the meaning of home.

Dangerous Idylls is his boldest work to date.

A breakup was only the spark. The real explosion was everything that followed.

In Bucaramanga, a city where heat sticks to the skin and the past refuses to stay buried, love and violence share the same bed. When Nancy Torres packs her pink suitcase and walks out on architect Hernando Villanueva, she unknowingly cracks open a fault line—and through it, Colombia's unresolved wars seep straight into the intimate lives of strangers who never asked to fight.

A professor stalked by a feverish ex-militiaman.
A trophy wife spiraling into paranoia and forbidden desire.
A jealous husband on the edge of becoming a killer.
A guerrilla commander and a survivor who return for debts peace never settled.
And a man who mistakes passion for salvation—until it almost gets everyone killed.

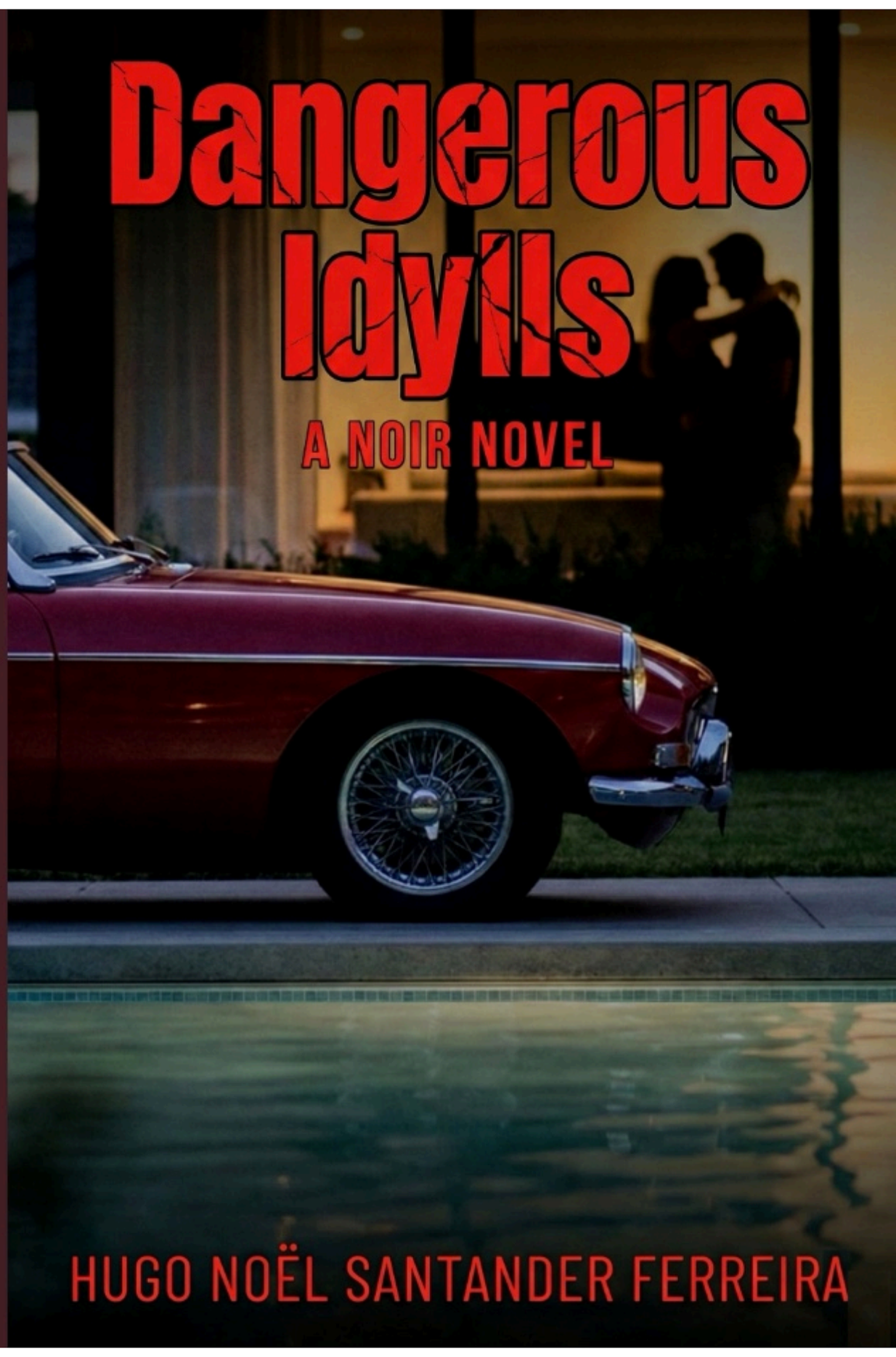
As past wounds collide with present obsessions, a kidnapping at Palonegro Airport becomes the epicenter of a story where jealousy, trauma, desire, and guilt operate with the same ruthless logic as war itself. Here, the weapons are psychological as often as they are literal; the battlegrounds are bedrooms, balconies, and therapy rooms; and the casualties are the people who dare to love in a country where love has never been safe.

Raw, fearless, and painfully human, Dangerous Idylls is a descent into the places where war mutates into intimacy—and where intimacy becomes its own form of battle.
A novel where no one escapes unscathed, and where the most brutal conflict is always the one inside us.

Welcome to Bucaramanga. Here, even love carries a trigger.

Dangerous Idylls

Hugo Santander Ferreira



EDITORIAL
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Hugo Noël Santander Ferreira

Dangerous Idylls

Crime Novel

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The only effective thing, he said, is violence.

Gabriel García Márquez

Colombia isn't El Dorado because of gold. It's El Dorado because with just one shipment of cocaine abroad, you can become a millionaire.

Colombian writer

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Prologue

In Colombia, war doesn't stay in the mountains with the guerrillas and the paramilitaries. It mutates. It slips into the city, into apartments that smell of coffee and regret, into marriages that stopped touching years ago, into the glow of a husband's laptop at 3 a.m. while he stalks his wife's messages, into the fevered brain of an ex-militiaman who traded jungle fatigues for street clothes but never gave up the gun. It hides in the body of a woman labeled "nympho" just because she wanted sex on her own terms. Hugo Noël Santander Ferreira knows this better than most, and he proves it without fireworks: historical violence doesn't always need bullets to keep killing. A bed is enough. A terrace overlooking the city is enough. A classified ad for "no-strings company" is enough. The parking lot of Palonegro Airport on a random Tuesday morning is more than enough.

Dangerous Idylls is the story of that migration.

It starts with what looks like a clean breakup: Nancy Torres snaps her pink suitcase shut and leaves for Medellín to start over. Hernando Villanueva—architect by trade, weekend poet by heartbreak—watches the door close the way you watch a border disappear. That soft click echoes like a far-off bomb nobody else hears, but it's the crack that lets everything else flood in: a man who mistakes intensity for love and passion for redemption, whose spiral drags everyone around him into a whirlpool where feelings work the same way power, submission, and terror always have in this country.

Because this is a novel that lives in the rarest corner of Colombian literature: the place where violence moves from the backroads and the jungle camps into the bedroom, the therapist's couch, the lonely 2 a.m. tears. The settings here—an upscale shrink's office, a kitchen where someone cries over cold coffee, a mattress where two bodies collide only to tear each other apart—are every bit as charged as an old ELN checkpoint or a dirt road

littered with burned-out buses.

From that first slammed door, the rest spill out: Ariadna, the trophy wife caught between a suffocating marriage and a rage she barely understands, trying to claw her way free through desire and ending up lost in a maze of guilt and Jungian "Wild Woman" archetypes in Dr. Yasmín Haddad's office. Marianne, the philosophy professor who quotes Schopenhauer until a sweating, gold-toothed ex-guerrilla jams a pistol against her skull and teaches her that even daylight can be kidnapped when a nation's violence seeps into private life. Riakola, former militiaman turned low-life crook, his rotting arm the perfect symbol of a country that infects everything it touches—proof that war just changes theaters, weapons, and targets. Emeterio, the jealous husband who almost turns into a murderer because he can't stand the thought that he might not be enough. Jerónimo and Nohora Valentina Sánchez, ghosts of the ELV come back to settle debts the peace accords never closed.

And always at the center: Bucaramanga—hills, sticky heat, and high-rises with names like Cabecera Torres del Pasado (Towers of the Past) because nobody here really forgets, even when we pretend we do. Every character carries the same national scar, just worn differently: jealousy that flirts with murder, kidnapping that feels like a twisted act of love, obsession that mistakes possession for protection, humiliation that fuels revenge.

Hugo Noël Santander Ferreira writes clean and mean. He knows exactly when to slow down so the pain lands harder and when to floor it so you feel the lurch of the highway to the airport where everything finally crashes together—and almost blows apart. The narrative voice is cold iron: it slides into whoever's head it wants and drags you down with them. We're inside Marianne's doubt seconds before the gun appears, inside Ariadna's vertigo when she realizes her life belongs to everyone but her, inside Riakola's fever as it distills the tragedy of thousands of men forged by war and then thrown away, inside Nancy's loneliness as she runs to save herself but leaves wreckage behind, inside Hernando's free-fall through a city night soaked in cheap rum, coke, hooker ads, and a loneliness that feels like a missing limb.

The poems scattered through the book—his and borrowed—are never decoration. They're metered scars, open wounds that speak when regular sentences can't carry the weight. Proof that Colombian culture long ago turned pain into art and despair into identity.

But the bravest thing *Dangerous Idylls* does is refuse the easy way out. Redemption, when it shows up, is thin and temporary. There are survivors holding each other on a terrace while the city below keeps breathing gasoline and jasmine. There's an ex-militiaman doing fifteen years. There's a woman reciting a poem never meant for her to a therapist who might be saving her—or might be another trap. There's a husband who learns too late that love was never about surveillance. There's a philosopher who finally understands that an angular body has every right to be desired.

This isn't just a portrait of a society; it's an autopsy of the psychic machinery that keeps violence alive. Through the brilliant lens of the psychiatrist's office, the novel digs into how diagnoses and Jungian archetypes become competing stories we tell ourselves to explain—or excuse—what we do. It asks how much of us is puppet and how much is puppeteer, and answers that in Colombia even the individual mind is occupied territory.

And it leaves you with an uncomfortable splinter: we all carry a war older than any peace deal. At some point every one of us has aimed at someone's heart and called it "I love you" with a finger on the trigger. We have all—at different moments—been Nancy, Hernando, Ariadna, Marianne, or Riakola. We've loved badly, mistaken lust for liberation, flirted with guilt, carried an invisible bullet in the chamber.

The book's greatest power is the mirror it holds up: dark, unflinching, merciless. Love, guilt, memory, and violence all crash together, and every character wounds or loves or fails from a place that is painfully, recognizably human. It forces the question none of us can dodge: what caliber round—literal or figurative—are we still carrying when we whisper "I love you," whether in terror or in hope?

Dangerous Idylls is a stark, precise reflection of the hardest

truth: sometimes the enemy is out there, but almost always he's in here.

Welcome to Bucaramanga. The war changed its uniform a long time ago, but it never took off its boots.

Leyla Margarita Tobías Buelvas

1. The scorned

That July morning, after having consulted—at his girlfriend's insistence—a fortune-teller on the outskirts of Piedecuesta, Hernando Villanueva woke up to say goodbye to Nancy. His black hair and sturdy build contrasted violently with his girlfriend's blonde mane and her silhouette of Renaissance matron.

"I made you some breakfast," Nancy said by way of greeting. "You need to be strong to lift those suitcases."

Hernando drank four cups of coffee and ate pancakes with maple syrup, the sweet sap of the Canadian maple tree that he ordered over the internet. He remembered how Nancy used to mock his fondness for anything foreign, but now everything sounded like a distant echo. While he chewed, his mind wandered toward the poets who had suffered for ungrateful loves: Petrarch, who dedicated his entire life to Laura, a married woman who never truly noticed his devotion, condemning him to an existence of lyrical melancholy. The Italian had written three hundred and sixty-six sonnets to an impossible love that would finally grant him worldly glory.

Will I be able to sing my sorrows the way he did? Hernando wondered in silence. *Will I be a man who risks everything for an illusion?*

The coffee tasted bitter that morning, as though it were already announcing the bitterness to come. Hernando tried to meet Nancy's gaze, but she avoided his eyes, concentrating on pouring more syrup over the pancakes. In her head echoed the verses she had written the night before:

My heart, wounded too soon,
keeps silent and smiles at your leaving,
too proud to renounce
the kisses and farewells of this goodbye.

After brushing her teeth she carried her lover's three

suitcases from the bedroom to the elevator, and from there to the silver-blue Ford sedan parked in front of the five-storey building in Bucaramanga. Each step weighed more than the last, as if her very legs were resisting the completion of that ritual of separation. She thought of Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, the Spanish poet who died poor and forgotten at thirty-four, eaten away by tuberculosis and abandoned by the woman he loved, Elisa Guillén, who preferred the security of another man over the poet's passion. Bécquer had written his *Rimas* in misery, and only after his death did the world recognise his genius. She remembered those heart-breaking verses:

The dark swallows will return
to hang their nests on your balcony,
and once more, wings against the panes,
they will play and call.

But those that paused their flight
to drink in your beauty and my joy,
those that learned our names…
those… will not return.

Verses that Hernando himself tried to imitate on sleepless nights, when he already sensed his destiny as a scorned man taking shape:

We true poets, my love,
are fragile as birds who, once caged,
would rather endure the hardship of a cell
than ever hurt you by flying away.

He murmured something as he let the last suitcase fall into the boot.

"I never thought she was capable of it," he said aloud, realising that she really was going to abandon him.

"Someone who truly loves knows how to wait," Nancy replied with a maternal tone that hinted at the pride of the empowered woman she so often proclaimed herself to be in

conversation—the duty and the right of every woman who rebels against what the authors of her favourite books called patriarchal society: Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* and Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics*, voices that promised to heal the echoes of those parties in the houses of Bogotá's Pepe Sierra neighbourhood.

Her heartbreaks were there, not in the linearity of a diary but in the cacophony of a feminist corpus boiling in her marrow: it was the first time she felt that the reins of her life were not gripped by male hands.

The fragments came like shards of a broken mirror: her teenage boyfriend, eldest son of the best-situated house in his Bogotá neighbourhood near Unicentro mall, whose power was measured by the number of female heads he could force down in arrogant fellatio in front of his friends; she, fifteen years old, watching the boldest girls at school turn into malleable clay in his hands, tasting the sour flavour of envy and her own humiliation.

How different from Carlo, the Italian who warned her with a wolfish grin: "I only want sex, bambina." And she, who believed she could tame desire with love, had cried in a marble bathroom while he forced her into a threesome with a stranger, her moans mingling with the hum of the exhaust fan.

"Isn't this what we agreed?" he whispered arrogantly afterwards, towelling himself dry.

But now fortune had turned in her favour. Hernando: the man who suffered more than she did, the fragile architect who carried suitcases while reciting verses he had composed for her on sleepless nights. Hernando: a trapped bird who insisted on staying inside a cage with no door. In him she tasted, for the first time, the sweet weight of dominion—not the brutal kind she had endured in clubs and bars, but the silent kind of a cat that refuses to be tamed, exactly as her teachers laid out like a theorem in their books: power does not lie in rejecting love, but in managing another's vulnerability.

As Hernando closed the boot, Nancy smiled.

She knew he would always love her: a certainty with which the universe compensated her for the excesses of all those who had reduced her to an easily conquered body. By leaving him for a job

opportunity she triumphed not through force but through the fragility that her rebellion against the past had mysteriously awakened in that man who offered himself up, like the Stone-Age kings beheaded year after year before their matriarch.

Nancy opened the boot again with a flirtatious glance. Hernando rearranged the suitcases, wondering whether her departure was revenge for his daring to love her unconditionally. His most recent verses echoed in his mind:

Love is that cold dagger
in which my heart found comfort,
the end of all its uncertainties and wandering.
Now that you tear it out—can't you see me dying?

Words that reminded him of Mariano José de Larra, the Madrilenian who shot himself at twenty-seven one February night in 1837 when Dolores Armijo—first his father's lover and then his own—left him for another man. Larra had scourged Spain in his articles, but it was heartbreak that killed him. According to another poet, he left behind an unopened letter and a clock stopped at the exact hour she walked out:

I write in solitude and I die in solitude.

"My girl!" Nancy called to a black cat. "My girl!"

The feline leapt into her arms; Nancy stroked her tenderly.

"We're going on a ten-hour trip," she whispered. "All the way to Medellín. Yes! You're going to meet some very handsome tomcats!"

She opened the passenger door of her silver-blue Ford sedan and placed the cat inside. Hernando watched the scene with a stab of absurd jealousy: even the cat would have more of Nancy than he would in the months to come.

"Nancy," he said, studying her freckled face, her hair lifted by the warm Bucaramanga breeze.

"Tell me."

"Don't go."

"It's 2006, Hernando," she replied. "You can't be that selfish."

"Selfish? Me?"

"I'm going to be a bank manager in Medellín," Nancy said. "It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. You, in my place, would have done the same."

"That's not true…" Hernando's voice cracked. "Let's talk."

"I don't want to leave late," Nancy said. "They say the narcos still stop cars at dawn on the Medellín road."

Hernando felt the words catch in his throat. Narcos: criminals. He thought of François Villon, the medieval French poet banished from Paris for love of a woman who betrayed him, losing everything—name, home, future. Villon wrote his ballads from exile, condemned to wander as an outlaw for having loved someone unworthy. His inconsolable cry returned:

Dying of thirst beside the fountain,
laughing through tears.

"How did I fall in love like this?" Hernando wondered. "Slave to someone who despises me and mocks my affection—an exile from myself?"

"What hurts me most is your indifference," he said, lowering his eyes.

"What?" Nancy asked, with a trace of boredom.

"You treat me like I'm worthless," Hernando said, thinking of Chekhov's pathetic character in *On the Harmful Effects of Tobacco*.

Only now did she fully understand Lord Byron, the poet who fled England because of love scandals, losing fortune and reputation to women who betrayed him—like Lady Caroline Lamb, who called him "mad, bad, and dangerous to know." Byron died far from home at thirty-six, in Greece, fighting a war that wasn't his, immolating himself for loves that had scorned him. She remembered his verses:

I loved not wisely, but too well,
and whoever loves like that
must meet his end with calm.

Am I the mad one today? Hernando thought. *For clinging to a woman who is ruining me?*

"What do you want me to do?" Nancy asked.

She slammed the car door.

"You could invite me, for instance," Hernando stammered.

"To Medellín?"

"To start over there," he said, a faint light in his eyes.

"Good God," Nancy snapped. "And your job?"

"I'll find something."

"Anything?" She smiled sarcastically. "Don't be naïve, Hernando. This country's economy is not exactly booming."

"It might take months, maybe years, but I'll find a new position."

"And meanwhile," Nancy cut in sharply, "how will you live?"

Hernando stared at her, offended. He remembered his cousin Joel's advice:

"Never declare unconditional love to a woman; she'll assume you'll never leave her."

And the sinister oracle the spirits had whispered, exactly as he had written it in his notebook:

If someone warns you against the one you love most,
do not turn a deaf ear to their counsel;
for time, that faithful mirror, may reveal

that fate was never slander.

What if he sought refuge in alcohol, like Alfred de Musset? The French poet shattered by George Sand, abandoned while sick in Venice, had never recovered; he drank himself into self-destruction, writing works of love and heartbreak until liquor killed him at forty-seven. His lines rang in Hernando's soul:

My cup is empty and my heart is too;
I have drunk the bitterness of love
to the very dregs.

"You know what I mean," Hernando said.

"You want me to support you?"

"That's not it."

"Wouldn't you be ashamed in front of our friends, our families? Besides, you're committed to your architecture firm; you have a project due at the end of the month."

Hernando felt something shatter inside him. Nancy's words were not just rejection; they were a verdict on his worth as a man.

"Stay," he begged, falling to his knees. "Or…"

Verses spilled from his lips almost against his will, a tiny fragment that summed up all his pain:

I know my words are drops in the wind,
that my verses will never draw sighs,
that my anguish no longer concerns you,
that I am a captive at the edge of the abyss…
what are you waiting for, my love, to push me?

Nancy bent down and brought her face close to his.

"You know I still love you," she sighed. "We'll just keep the relationship long-distance."

She kissed him. Hernando did not respond to the budding passion and whispered in her ear:

"I've already told you: if you leave, we're finished."

Nancy straightened, looked at him sceptically, then smiled with impatient triumph, climbed into the car, and started the engine.

While the engine purred with a mechanical coldness that cut through the humid Bucaramanga air, Nancy watched Hernando's kneeling figure not with pity but with the clear lucidity of someone who has finally deciphered the hidden codes of

affective power.

Her smile avoided the vulgarity of open victory; instead it exhaled a maternal air of epistemological understanding.

A man like that will never leave me for another woman, she thought, and the sentence echoed in her mind like a proven theorem. Not because of her beauty or her intelligence, but because she had become the architect of his desire. Hernando did not love a woman; he loved the relational construct she had built—the distant muse, the chosen cage, the emptiness around which his identity as a poet orbited.

He was the last link of romantic patriarchy, yes—but domesticated: a paper tiger that roared self-pitying verses instead of devouring.

And if the fragile balance ever broke—if that equilibrium shattered—her thought was not spiteful but a practical application of the queer theory she had read in Beatriz Preciado: desire is not scarce; it is a flow. It would not be hard to find another poet.

Medellín, the world, was full of fragile men who believed their pain made them interesting, artists who mistook suffering for depth. She had learned to heal those wounds, but also to manage them. She could find another—someone who, like Hernando, would rather endure the hardship of a cell than hurt her, only with better rhythm, fresher metaphors.

Seeing him on his knees, begging, Nancy no longer saw a lover; she saw a structure.

He was the end product of centuries of romantic patriarchy: the man who believes he is strong because he believes he suffers more, the one who ritually surrenders in order not to relinquish control of the narrative.

His pathetic warning—"we're finished"—was a last attempt to own the script of the breakup.

But Nancy had already rewritten that script:

"We'll just continue long-distance."

That was the genius of her move. It was not so much rupture as transmutation. He would still be her poet, her caged bird, but now the cage would have the dimensions of a continent.

She could go out, live, experience, while his devotion

remained frozen in the amber of waiting: a monument to her own power.

As she drove off without looking back, Nancy felt no stab of loss.

She felt the stillness of a power that no longer needs to prove itself.

Yes. There was no longer any doubt. Hernando would always love her as long as she held the keys to his affection. And if one day she lost him, she knew that in the great bazaar of identities and affections there would always be another man—helpless poet or wealthy narco—ready to sing from behind his own bars.

The mockery was more than he could bear. Hernando stood, turned his back on her, and returned to the apartment without noticing the piece of his life disappearing on the horizon toward Medellín. Once inside, he collapsed to the floor and wept like a child for two hours, as he would for the following weeks. John Keats had done the same—that young Englishman who died tubercular and poor at twenty-five, obsessed with Fanny Brawne, who rejected him in life yet mourned him once the genius had wasted away in Rome, far from England, coughing blood and writing immortal verses she never valued while he still lived.

"Great loves always end in tragedy," Hernando murmured, wondering whether his fascination with so many unhappy poets didn't already reveal that time is written in advance, and that our interests—the films we watch, the books we choose—are circumscribed by what we are destined to live.

He was dying the way Arthur Rimbaud had at seventeen, author of the most revolutionary verses in the French language, only to be abandoned by Paul Verlaine, his lover and mentor, who shot him in a fit of jealousy. In the dimness of his apartment Hernando heard, like a whisper from Arles, Vincent van Gogh's desperate confession to his brother Theo:

"What can I do? Sometimes I think all my misfortunes, illnesses, anguish are necessary if I am to do anything at all."

It was Verlaine himself who, from the depths of his own

guilt and genius, dedicated to Rimbaud the verses of "Chanson d'automne":

Et je m'en irai loin, bien loin, comme un bohémien,
Par la Nature—heureux comme avec une femme.

But the reply of the sublime adolescent, the visionary who burned through his life in five years, rang even stronger in Hernando's heart—Rimbaud in *A Season in Hell*, spitting his final verdict on the love that had poisoned him:

I invented the colour of vowels!—A black, E white, I red, O blue, U green. I regulated the form and movement of every consonant, and with instinctive rhythms I flattered myself I had invented a poetic language that one day would be accessible to every sense.

That had been both his glory and his downfall. Like Van Gogh with Gauguin—another scene from the same subterranean vein of love that destroys—it ended in a bullet and abandonment. Rimbaud abandoned poetry at twenty-one, sick of love and art, and spent the rest of his short life wandering Africa, trafficking arms and coffee, dying at thirty-seven with an amputated leg, having renounced his genius because of the pain of a love that betrayed him.

"Will that be my end?" Hernando asked through tears. "Unable ever to love again for fear of this suffering?"

The next day, when he returned from work, he found the apartment half-dark and silent. He stopped in the middle of the living-room and stared at the empty sofa. From far away he could still hear Nancy's laughter.

He sat on the right-hand side, leaving the left cushion vacant as if she were still expected. He turned on the television and flicked through channels at top speed. New verses rose in his mind:

Phantom of past delights,
were you not, after all,
nothing but fleeting pleasure
shared in cinemas and on sofas?

Why do you return with your fire and your ardour
to burn me without letting me die?

Hours later his gaze drifted to the left and there she was, asleep in pyjamas, naked beneath them, curled on another man's lap. If once that man had been him, who was it now? Hernando would wake her, lift her, kiss her.

"How did the film end?" she would ask, drowsy.

He would lie down beside her in front of the mute images on the screen.

"I love you," he would say.

He never heard her reply; her body dissolved in his arms.

He woke and went to the bar, uncorked another bottle of vodka.

"I'm an alcoholic," he admitted to himself, realising he was drinking almost a litre a day.

He was now walking in the footsteps of Edgar Allan Poe, destroyed by drink and the loss of Virginia Clemm, his cousin and wife, who died of tuberculosis at twenty-four, leaving him on the edge of an abyss of opium, bourbon and dark verses until one night, after wandering drunk through the streets of Baltimore, delirious and dying, they found him in an alley, dressed in another man's clothes, murmuring his lady's name.

Then, upon the velvet sinking, I betook myself to linking
Fancy unto fancy, thinking what this ominous bird of yore—
What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore
Meant in croaking "Nevermore."

He died at forty, ruined by grief and bourbon, without a penny, without family, without hope.

"Why don't I just die like him?" Hernando asked himself, and immediately answered: "Because a little anger is still allowed when the ungrateful woman is alive."

Toward midnight a commercial appeared.

A dizzying montage of gleaming images: bodies brushing against one another, damp skin under a golden light that does not exist in the real world. A man with a perfect jawline walks among

reflections of glass and water. Identical women surround him in their learned desire. Nothing is accidental: every glance, every drop of sweat, every blink has been calibrated to sell an emotion that belongs to no one.

A deep, calm voice—the voice of someone who never needs to shout—pronounces:

"KOM, the new fragrance by Kail Cheveer. For the man who has everything… except limits. For the man who turns every desire into achievement. For the man who never stops, because stopping is losing."

The man tilts his head, sprays his neck, and the women approach as if obeying a biological command.

"KOM—the scent of power. For those who know that love is an investment. For those who live without asking forgiveness. For those who conquer because they can."

The ad ends with the protagonist seen from behind, gazing at an impossible horizon, his silhouette cut out against the artificial sea of a studio. A slogan flashes on the screen, shining like a perfect lie:

KOM—Be yourself. But better.

Crushed, he reproached himself for wasting his life mourning a woman who had abandoned him. Yes, he was living the passions of *Wuthering Heights*, and he knew they were exaggerated and melodramatic, as his psychologist, Dr. Yasmín Haddad, would tell him weeks later.

But that was precisely why the novel seduced him. Heathcliff transcended the man and became a volcano, a hatred that lasted generations, a vengeance not even death could extinguish. Catherine transcended the woman and became a hurricane that swept away everything, including her own sanity. In real life no one digs up graves to sleep beside a corpse, no one curses an enemy's descendants to the third generation. Love dissolves into bills, awkward silences, a "maybe I'll come back" that never arrives.

Yet *Wuthering Heights* attracted him because it promised

that pain could be epic. Not his pain—he who drank himself sick alone, who wrote verses no one would ever read, who woke sweating because he had dreamed Nancy was returning—but a pain worth telling. The book turned humiliation into tragedy, abandonment into cataclysm. Heathcliff does not suffer; he becomes the storm. Catherine does not repent; she becomes a ghost.

Hernando's relationship with the novel was therefore false and true at the same time. False, because he was not Heathcliff: he had no moors to inherit, no Lockwood to narrate his story, no graveyard where he could lie beside his beloved. True, because like Heathcliff he clung to a love that was destroying him. The only difference was scale: one ravaged Yorkshire; the other, an apartment in Bucaramanga. One was legend; the other, a man drinking cheap vodka and talking to himself.

"Will I become a modern Heathcliff?" he wondered. "Destroying everything around me for a woman who chose another life?"

Dr. Yasmín Haddad was right: *Wuthering Heights* was too passionate for real human beings. But it was also the only place where Hernando's pain found an echo.

He took the copy his father had given him for his last birthday, opened to the pages he knew by heart, then closed the book without reading. He no longer needed anyone else's words; his own pain had already made them his.

He saw himself in the middle of the living-room, facing the empty sofa. He knelt and clutched his head in his hands.

"Oh God!" he shouted. "Do not let me fall apart! Deliver me from all evil and I will bear witness to you every day of my life!"

He remained there motionless, in silence, until the urge to give shape to his emotions overcame him. He went to his desk, took out a notebook, wrote on the cover *Poems to Nancy*, and composed a dozen sonnets until, at dawn, the shouts of children playing in the street reminded him he had to get ready for work.

Days later he lunched on a bottle of aguardiente at Gastrolandia, the Bucaramanga grill famous for its meats. Before returning to his office on the ground floor of a building beside Las

Palmas Park, he bought and snorted half a gram of cocaine—just enough to appear sober in front of his colleagues.

He told himself he was now incarnating Baudelaire, the cursed poet who had consumed opium and hashish in search of artificial paradises to escape forbidden loves and a society that rejected him. Baudelaire died paralysed and aphasic at forty-six, ravaged by syphilis and drugs, having written *Les Fleurs du Mal* amid degradation and scandal.

"Isn't self-destruction the highest form of art, prefigured by the Messiah's own immolation?" he asked himself.

Three hours later, leaving the office, the alcohol hit again. Dressed in black trousers and black shirt, eyes ringed from three nights of insomnia, Hernando walked along Carrera 33 slower than the rest of the pedestrians. Breaking every rule of decorum, he decided to flirt, one after another, with every attractive woman he passed.

The first, plunging neckline, looked at him seriously, curious, then ignored his winks.

The second smiled politely, grateful that he had rested his eyes on her hips, and walked away without turning back.

The third, about fifteen, looked at him with innocent voluptuousness. Foreseeing trouble with her family, he let her go.

Then a blonde with gigantic breasts. She met his stare, immediately looked away and climbed into a Mercedes where an old man was waiting.

The fifth, around forty, had prominent buttocks. Hernando examined them openly; she recoiled in fear and took the hand of her elderly fiancé.

A pair of slender lesbians, arm in arm, smiled exaggeratedly at him and burst into mocking laughter.

His talent for seducing passers-by had vanished.

Sweating profusely, he entered Dipatricio's, the restaurant he and Nancy used to visit every Sunday. The doorman resembled the young Pablo Neruda, who had also suffered exile and betrayal by women, losing homeland and peace for verses branded into his soul. The twenty love poems the Chilean wrote in his youth were an elegy to a woman who had briefly been his, his soul still

unscarred before Cold-War propaganda stained it. Neither fame nor the Nobel Prize protected him from the mob's fury; he died sick and alone days after Pinochet's coup, his house ransacked, his heart broken by an ungrateful country.

"Not even glory protects those who back a genocidaire like Stalin," Hernando thought.

"Good afternoon, architect," the waiter said. "This way, please."

He was led to a table on the second floor overlooking Carrera 27. He sighed, sat, buried his face in his hands, looked at the trees outside, and took the menu.

"A whisky, Edgardo, please."

"And for Dr. Nancy?"

Hernando stared at him, dismayed. He had no desire to explain himself to someone who had grown used to their speeches about the eternity of their love.

"No…" he muttered. "She… I'll be right back."

He stood and left the restaurant without hearing Edgardo's apologies.

"That bastard already knew," he thought, immediately fearing the accusation was unfair.

Since Nancy's departure, Hernando's life had changed its map. Before, his routines were drawn around morning coffee and reading behind curtains; now the night city offered a new geography—neon labyrinths, bars exhaling smoke and half-finished songs, discreet brothels, massage parlours advertised in the classifieds of *El Soplón* under the euphemism "Masajes."

It was in those classifieds that, for the first time and feeling betrayed, he sought consolation in the services of a woman—heir to the oldest profession in the world: a momentary sedative, a rented foreign body, a vapour that tried in vain to fill the void left by Nancy and what they once were.

His descent into bars and encounters with paid companions had begun on a Thursday afternoon three months earlier, when Nancy called from the airport to cancel their date at the Cañaveral cinema.

In a hurried, almost guilty voice she explained that she had

been invited to a banking conference with generous expenses paid:

"Four days, love," she said, breathing nervously. "Back Monday night."

Behind her voice Hernando could hear boarding announcements, the squeak of suitcase wheels on polished floors, the murmur of travellers—already the sound of distance opening between them.

"Which hotel?" he asked, trying to sound casual, though even he heard the interrogation in his tone.

"Mesón de la Plaza," she answered without hesitation. "I'll give you the front-desk number. Don't worry, it's just work."

But Hernando did worry.

Friday noon he called the hotel for the first time. From his Bucaramanga apartment he stared blindly out the window, phone pressed to his ear.

"Hotel Mesón de la Plaza, good afternoon," answered a woman's voice—professional, melodic.

"Good afternoon. I need to speak to a guest, Miss Nancy Torres."

"One moment, sir."

Silence, keyboard clicks.

"I'm sorry, sir, Miss Torres left early this morning. She's not in her room right now."

"Left?" His voice trembled. "At what time?"

"Around nine, I think. But don't worry—she probably went sightseeing. Villa de Leyva is beautiful this time of year."

He ran a hand over his face.

"No message?"

"No, sir. Would you like to leave one?"

"Yes. Tell her Hernando called. Urgent."

"Of course, Mr. Hernando. I'll leave the note."

He hung up. Forty minutes later he called again.

Same voice—Samantha.

"No, she hasn't returned yet. Guests often spend the whole day out."

"But it's almost six…"

"She's probably having dinner. There are many nice places

in Boyacá."

"She's there for work," he muttered.

"Exactly. But work events often include long lunches, informal meetings…"

He hung up feeling ridiculous.

That night he couldn't sleep. Suspicion gnawed like slow poison—jealousy,

that green-eyed monster which doth mock
the meat it feeds on.

The green that could have been pastoral meadows had become the green of bile, the Elizabethan sickness eating him from within. And the meat was himself: every memory of Nancy rotting while he pictured her laughing with another man.

Saturday afternoon he called again.

Samantha: "Miss Nancy is in the hotel. She just arrived."

He asked to be connected. Four rings. No answer.

"She might be in the shower," Samantha said. "Guests usually shower the moment they walk in."

Sunday he called six times.

First: she had gone out early.

Second: she had come back but left again.

Third, fourth, fifth: no answer.

Sixth, late at night, Samantha spoke with measured patience:

"Mr. Hernando, Miss Nancy is resting. She asked not to be disturbed. She has an early presentation tomorrow."

"Did you give her my messages?"

"Every one. But she's focused on work."

"I've been trying to reach her for three days…"

"And she's been immersed in intense activities—conferences, business lunches, networking. Let her rest."

Silence. His heart pounded like a war drum.

I am not what I am.

Iago's line, but now it was Nancy: the exhausted executive in Villa de Leyva, the lover in the elevator, the sleeping girlfriend in Bucaramanga. Three masks, one body. Modern infidelity is performative dissociation. She didn't lie badly; she lied perfectly, because she had learned to be three women without any of them betraying the others.

"I'll be frank," Samantha said, lowering her voice just enough. "Long-distance relationships require absolute trust. Constant calls create unnecessary pressure. Give her space."

He hung up.

But the cold stone in his stomach stayed.

But jealous souls will not be answered so;
they are not ever jealous for the cause,
but jealous for they're jealous.

The verse had terrified him… until it stopped. Because when infidelity is real, the jealous man ceases to be irrational and becomes a witness. The monster no longer feeds on itself; it feeds on facts: the note at reception, the blue suit, the elevator that went to the wrong floor.

Samantha knew more than she let on.

That same night she had watched Nancy leave the hotel restaurant arm in arm with a man in a blue suit. They were laughing, hands brushing with unmistakable intimacy. She saw them enter the elevator together. Her job was discretion: guests paid for privacy, not judgement.

When Nancy passed reception later, Samantha smiled neutrally.

"Your boyfriend has called several times."

Nancy paled.

"What did you tell him?"

"That you were busy with work and needed rest. Don't worry—I prioritise guest confidentiality."

Nancy slid a folded bill across the counter.

Samantha pocketed it and went on with her night.

When Nancy finally returned to Bucaramanga on Monday

afternoon, she dropped her suitcase inside the door and collapsed into bed without a word.

She slept all day, sunk in heavy, almost animal sleep, her body defeated like after a long battle.

Hernando watched from the doorway, motionless.

O, that the slave had forty thousand lives!
One is too poor, too weak for my revenge.

It wasn't Cassio. It was her. Forty thousand ways to confront her, forty thousand silences he would keep. Violence, in him, took the form of the searched suitcase, the note kept like a war trophy.

Her cheeks still flushed, pretending to carry the cold of the high plateau, but he saw only the heat of other lips. A blush that should have been exhaustion from work but only betrayed the afterglow of pleasure recently spent, the imprint of ecstasies that had not been his.

He imagined every illicit exertion: sighs muffled in hotel pillows, bodies entwined under sheets that smelled of another man, gasps that Samantha covered with talk of "early presentations." The exhaustion of fake conferences or of entire nights surrendered to lust, of mornings feigning composure while her body still trembled from someone else's orgasms.

Nancy woke late that night, eyes heavy, voice hoarse.

"God, love, what an exhausting trip," she sighed, stretching with feline languor. "I barely slept."

Hernando nodded.

He did not contradict her. He did not ask.

But while she showered, he opened the suitcase and found, carefully folded, the hotel note:

"Thank you for your visit. We hope to receive *you* again soon."

You—plural.

And one last quotation, whispered to the ceiling while she sang in the shower:

Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate, nor set down

aught in malice.

But he would not speak. He would keep the note, the forty-seven unanswered messages, the new perfume. And when Nancy smiled at him, he would smile back.

Because the betrayed, like the traitors, also learn to pretend.

2. *Bucaramanga at Night*

A month after Nancy announced she'd be attending another conference, Hernando didn't even bother calling her. Instead, the moment he began to miss her that Saturday night—unable to sleep—he opened *El Soplón* for the first time in his life. He had bought the paper at a traffic light from a kid who was also selling gum and single cigarettes. The newspaper smelled of fresh ink and something else—of secrecy, of clandestine deals, of that nocturnal Bucaramanga he only knew by hearsay.

Classifieds section. Page twelve. "Massages."

The ads were crushed against each other in tiny print: "Discreet young lady offers relaxing massages. Call after 8 p.m." "Professional in therapeutic massage, residential areas, hotels and apartments."

"Venezuelan, new in town, special treatment, maximum discretion."

Hernando felt disgust and fascination in equal measure. He dialed the first number with trembling hands, hung up before anyone answered. He dialed the second, let it ring twice, hung up again. On the third attempt, a woman's voice answered, bored, almost mechanical:

"Hello?"

"I… saw your ad," Hernando said.

"Where are you?"

"At home. In the north."

"It's eighty thousand an hour. If you want me to go over there, it's another hundred for the taxi."

Hernando hung up. He couldn't do it in his own place, in the bed he shared with Nancy, under the same roof where they'd had breakfast together that very morning. He dialed another number.

The woman who answered sounded softer, almost maternal.

"Good evening, love. How can I help you?"

"The ad… massages…"

"Sure, of course. I have an apartment in a quiet neighborhood. Do you know the area?"

"Yes."

"Perfect. Write down the address."

At first it became a clandestine ritual: whenever Nancy was gone for more than a week—"I'm going to a conference," she would say; or "The signal is terrible in Tota, I can't talk"—Hernando would open the paper with shaking hands, scan the addresses, and choose. He wasn't looking for love; he promised himself this would be a material antidote, proof that he could reclaim control over his own pleasure.

The first time, it was Marisol.

She opened the door at ten-thirty. The building was old, exposed brick, in the García Rovira neighborhood. She wore a blue satin robe and had her hair pulled up in a high ponytail. She smelled of lavender soap and tobacco.

"First time here?" she asked, taking his jacket.

"First time… doing this," he answered hoarsely.

"I don't bite," she said, and closed the door.

The room was small: a king-size bed, a ceiling fan turning slowly, a lava lamp projecting red shadows on the wall. Marisol sat on the edge of the mattress and lit a cigarette.

"I've got two kids," she said without preamble, exhaling smoke toward the ceiling. "Fourteen, both of them. They live in Barranquilla with my mom. I support them doing this. So they'll never have to come to a place like this… or pay someone like me. That happened to a friend of mine: her own son, without knowing.

She found out later. She killed herself."

Hernando stayed standing, his hands stuffed in his pockets.

"And you? Do you like this?"

Marisol let out a dry laugh, humorless.

"Like it? I don't feel anything, *papi*. No pleasure, no disgust. I just count the bills. It's a job. I go in, I fake it, I go out. Sometimes I don't even fake it. Men don't notice the difference."

She slipped off her robe. Underneath she wore simple black underwear, no lace. She lay on her back and opened her legs with the same casualness with which someone opens a fridge.

"Start whenever you want. The clock's running."

Hernando moved closer with more stubborn bravado than desire. He wanted to prove to her—and to himself—that he could break the routine, that he could pull something real out of this woman who had declared herself dead inside. He knelt between her legs, slowly, unhurried. He kissed the inside of her thighs, the warm skin, slightly rough. She stared at the ceiling, impassive.

"No need to try so hard," she said. "I'm not gonna come. I never do."

He didn't answer. He kept going. With his tongue, with his fingers, with a patience he didn't know he had. Minutes. Ten, fifteen. She remained motionless, eyes fixed on the lava lamp. Until a tremor—almost imperceptible—ran along her hip. A strangled gasp. Another. Her hands, which had been inert at her sides, gripped the sheets. Her body tightened, arched, and suddenly a short, genuine cry escaped her, beyond any performance.

Marisol bolted upright, eyes wide, chest rising and falling rapidly.

"What the hell did you do?" she whispered.

Hernando wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"You heard me. I told you I don't feel anything," she said, but she no longer sounded convinced.

They fell silent. She pulled the sheet over herself; he sat on the edge of the bed. He lit a cigarette and passed it to her.

"Is it always like this?" he asked.

"What is?"

"They say they don't feel anything… and then they do."

Marisol took a long drag.

"No. Most don't even try. They pay, they come in, they leave. Sometimes they don't even look me in the eye. But you… you wanted something. I don't know what."

"And if you liked it?" he asked, almost taunting.

She held his gaze.

"If I liked it," she said, "then everything I said earlier was a lie. The kids, Barranquilla, the 'I don't feel anything.' All of it. I tell that so the client feels special, so he thinks he's breaking through something. So he'll pay more next time. It works."

Hernando felt the floor sway beneath him.

"So… nothing's true?"

Marisol shrugged.

"The kids are real. The friend who killed herself too. But the pleasure… depends on the day. Today, with you, it was real. I didn't plan it."

She got up, slipped on her robe, went to the mirror, and retouched her lipstick.

"Do you know how many people have been in this bed?" she asked, without turning around. "Mayors, pastors, doctors, professors, the wife of the president of the best university in the region. All with their secrets. All thinking they're the only ones who make me 'feel.' I know people, *papi*. I know what they hide when they take off their ties."

Hernando dressed in silence. As he left, she gave him a dry, professional kiss on the cheek.

"Come back whenever you want. Just don't come looking for truth here. I don't sell that."

I must enjoy the pleasures of Venus, he told himself to justify it.

Every vice is also an exploration of the forbidden, and Hernando, who had already lost his compass, decided to wander down the darkest corridors of the circle he now frequented.

One night he chose a woman who advertised in big letters: "Anal, no taboos." She was dark-skinned, wide-hipped, with a smoker's raspy voice. In a motel on 33rd Avenue he did it with a mix of curiosity and anticipatory pleasure. She guided him with the same professional indifference with which someone changes a

lightbulb.

"Relax, *papi*," she said. "This part costs extra too."

When it was over, Hernando felt only the usual emptiness and, at most, the childish satisfaction of telling himself he had now "sodomized a woman."

None of these experiences showed him anything new. No different pleasure, no revelation, not even a sharper sense of guilt. Only the confirmation that he felt at ease with women—he had always preferred them—and that those detours were nothing more than necessary wanderings through side corridors of the same hell he replayed without remedy.

Another was Alejandra, the girl from Cúcuta with the mole next to her navel. She arrived half an hour late, chewing gum, her hair in a high ponytail that made her look younger than she probably was. She charged sixty thousand pesos, counted the bills with quick fingers, and tucked them into a hidden pocket in her purse.

"First time?" she asked, not waiting for an answer. "It's all right, *papi*. I'll take care of you."

She was mechanical, efficient, almost boring. When she finished, she got dressed in silence, checked that she had all her things, and left without saying goodbye. Hernando stayed seated on the motel bed, staring at the walls painted a sickly peach color, feeling something had broken inside him and he had no idea how to put it back together.

Another Friday, a different kind of curiosity—one laced with self-loathing—led him to a dimly lit apartment in the Mutis neighborhood. The ad had been explicit: *"Camila—For the Gentleman Who Knows What He Wants."* The building was a modern, anonymous tower, a stark contrast to Marisol's exposed brick.

Camila opened the door and, for a moment, Hernando forgot to breathe. She was breathtaking. Tall, with the sculpted grace of a dancer, wearing a silk kimono that hinted at curves both feminine and subtly, intriguingly ambiguous. Her makeup was flawless, her eyes intelligent and appraising. She didn't smell of cheap soap or tobacco, but of sandalwood and something faintly metallic, like ozone after a storm.

"Hernando," he managed, feeling oafish and transparent.

"Camila," she replied, her voice a resonant contralto that was neither a performance nor an attempt to deceive, but simply her own. She ushered him into a minimalist living room. Art books lay open on a glass table—Bacon, Schiele—and a cello stood in the corner like a silent witness. This was not a room for faking it.

"You're not what I expected," Hernando said, the cliché tumbling out.

A faint, knowing smile touched her lips. "Few are. Most men who come here are chasing a ghost or punishing one. Which are you?"

The question, so direct and clinical, disarmed him. "I… don't know."

"Let's find out," she said, loosening the knot of her kimono. It pooled at her feet. She stood before him, unashamed. Her body was a map of contradictions: the soft sweep of a hip, the sharp line of a shoulder, the softness of her breasts and the quiet, undeniable truth of her masculinity between her legs. It was a body that refused easy categorization, a living critique of everything Hernando thought he understood about desire.

He felt a dizzying vertigo. This wasn't the mechanical transaction he'd anticipated. It was a confrontation.

"You're hesitating," she observed—not with mockery, but with the detached interest of a scientist. "The body confuses you. You wanted transgression, but now you're faced with its reality. It's always more complicated than the fantasy, isn't it?"

He moved closer, his bravado gone, replaced by a raw, trembling curiosity. When he touched her, it wasn't with lust but with a desperate need to understand. His hands traced the topography of her skin—the smooth plane of her stomach, the firm muscle of her back. He was mapping the boundaries of his own desire and finding them far more porous than he'd ever imagined.

When he entered her, it was with a shocking, almost spiritual intimacy. Camila's eyes remained open, locked on his, reflecting his own fractured image back at him.

"You see?" she whispered, her voice steady, her body both yielding and fiercely present. "This is the secret they all come for.

It's not about men or women. It's about the self. I am the mirror. You're not fucking a *'travesty'*. You're fucking your own deepest contradiction."

Her words hit him like a physical blow. In this act, so far outside the bounds of his "family upbringing," he wasn't just breaking a rule; he was shattering the frame it was written on. He wasn't exploring some 'perverse pleasure'; he was staring into the abyss of his own identity and discovering it was not a fixed point, but a fluid, terrifying possibility.

He finished quickly, overwhelmed. He pulled away, his body trembling not with release, but with existential shock.

Camila rose, wrapped herself in the kimono, and walked to the cello. She didn't play it; she only rested a hand on its wood, as if drawing strength from its silent potential for music.

"Most men leave here ashamed," she said, her back to him. "They came to conquer a fetish and instead encountered a person—someone who saw straight through them. That's the real service I provide. Not my body, but the reflection."

Hernando dressed in silence, his mind reeling. The encounter with Marisol had been about breaking through someone else's numbness. This one was about breaking through his own.

As he handed her the money, their fingers brushed. She held his gaze.

"You came here thinking you were crossing a line," she said. "But the only line that exists is the one you drew yourself. Remember that the next time you look in the mirror."

He left her apartment feeling more hollow and more full than ever before. He hadn't just paid for a body; he had paid for a brutal, unforgiving session of therapy. Camila hadn't just satisfied a curiosity; she had dismantled it and, in doing so, dismantled a part of him. The cage, he realized, wasn't just made by Nancy or by circumstance. Its most durable bars were the ones he had forged himself, deep within his own mind.

There was one who was different. She was older, forty-something, with stretch marks on her belly and tired but kind eyes. She had a small but clean apartment, with floral curtains and plants in the windows. She put on Chavela Vargas, poured two glasses of

whiskey with ice.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Hernando."

"I'm Patricia. Well, that's not my real name, but that's what you can call me."

He talked with her. He told her, without too many details, that his partner traveled a lot, that he felt lonely, that he didn't know what he was doing there. Patricia listened without judging, nodding now and then, refilling their glasses when they ran dry.

"We all come here for a reason," she said at last. "And every reason's valid, my love. Don't torture yourself."

But Hernando did torture himself. With every visit, with every ad he marked in *El Soplón*, with every number stored in his phone under fake names: El Tornillo Hardware, La Rosca Distributors, El Perno Auto Parts. Names Nancy would never question if she ever checked his phone.

His wildest experiment, the one that broke most violently with his family upbringing, was with a shaved, muscular twenty-year-old who advertised himself as "discreet." As Hernando penetrated him, the boy delivered the line with the grin of a timeshare salesman:

"If you pass up the young ones, *papi*, you're missing half the fun."

Hernando closed his eyes and thought of the archetype of all the women he had ever desired: her mouth, her breasts, the exact way her neck smelled after making love. When it was over, the boy asked for a tip "for the good chemistry."

Another weekend when Nancy vanished—that Laguna de Tota excuse that had sounded so plausible in her mouth—turned out to be the breaking point. She left on a Thursday; came back on a Monday with no convincing explanation. In the meantime, Hernando had spent Saturday night in a bar on a street he didn't recognize, watching the city approach and refuse him at the same time. He ended up in a spa he'd found in an ad promising "full-body massages" and "professional treatment."

The woman who tended to him was cordial, precise, professional: she calmed his shaking hands, talked little, left him

with the feeling of having consummated a kind of ritual transaction. That same feeling pushed him to repeat the gesture whenever the distance between them stretched again.

But with each repetition, something was eroding. Not just his sense of morality or his idea of partnership—those were abstractions he could rationalize, justify, stash in a corner of his conscience. What eroded was something deeper: his capacity to feel.

The prostitutes stopped being people and became functions, services, temporary solutions to a permanent problem.

And he stopped being Hernando and turned into just another client among many, with his agreed-upon rate and his scheduled hour.

Nancy came back from her trips more distant each time. She no longer brought anecdotes from the conferences, no longer showed excitement for the professional contacts she supposedly made. She arrived exhausted, took long showers, slipped into bed, and slept with her back to him. And Hernando, instead of confronting her, instead of demanding explanations or confessing his own betrayals, simply waited for her to announce the next trip so he could dial another number from *El Soplón*.

It was a tacit pact, an equilibrium of lies that held their relationship up like two parallel columns that never touch yet support the same roof.

Hernando had wanted to get married. He proposed twice in three months of living together. The first time, Nancy laughed tenderly and told him marriage was a meaningless piece of paper. The second time, a month later, she grew serious and explained she didn't believe in institutions, that love didn't need contracts, that living together was commitment enough.

"Don't you love me enough?" Hernando had asked that second time.

"I love you," Nancy answered. "But marriage has nothing to do with love. It's a social invention, a legal business. We don't need it."

Hernando didn't insist again. But the seed of doubt had been planted: why did Nancy refuse to marry? What door did she want

to keep open?

His desperation over the lack of a simple message—a call, an "I arrived safe"—pushed him toward extreme reading. One sleepless night he opened a gothic-looking volume of Swedenborg, hoping that somewhere in those pages between heaven and hell he'd find an authority that could make sense of it all.

The book had appeared in his life almost by accident. He'd been wandering through a used bookstore downtown, looking for something to distract him from his circular thoughts. His fingers slid along the spines in the philosophy and religion section until they stopped on a thick, wine-colored hardcover with gold letters that read:

De Amore Conjugiali — Emanuel Swedenborg.

He leafed through it aimlessly, just curious. The first lines struck him as strangely pure, almost from another century. Swedenborg wrote about heavenly marriages, about unions that transcended the flesh, about loves that continued beyond death.

But he also wrote about the opposite: invisible separations, spiritual infidelities, an "animosity" that grows like a secret disease in the soul.

"How much is it?" Hernando asked.

"Whatever you want to give," said the woman behind the counter, thick glasses, a pleasant, playful smile. "Books in strange languages don't sell. They sit there six, seven years until someone finally comes who can read them. If you appreciate it, I know you'll pay me well."

"I'll pay whatever you ask," Hernando insisted.

She nodded, satisfied with the negotiation.

Her price was high, but Hernando had already agreed to pay it. No book is too expensive for someone who knows he's found in it the fire that will light up his ignorance.

For days, *De Amore Conjugiali* lay closed on his desk among papers and magazines. Sometimes, while Nancy worked in the garden or talked on the phone, Hernando would glance at it there—harmless, waiting. Then came the silence, the slow fracture, the first nights in separate rooms.

Then she left for another conference. The apartment turned

into a tidy, quiet cave.

One rainy afternoon, while he was trying to straighten drawers, tired of his role as the cuckolded man, Hernando found the volume on a shelf. He opened it at random, without religious intent or theatrics: driven only by the impulse of someone who wants to understand his own ruin.

The Latin letters jumped at his eyes like a verdict:

Adulteria, etiamsi in mundo occulta, in mundo spirituali non sunt occulta; ibi enim omnes apparent secundum vitae interiores, et tales apparent ut sunt.

Adulteries, though they may be hidden in the natural world, are not hidden in the spiritual world; there everyone appears according to their inner life, and such as they truly are. — De Amore Conjugiali §499

He felt as if the text were watching him. It didn't accuse him, but it didn't absolve him either.

He had believed the damage was confined to the human realm: betrayal, lack of love, routine. But Swedenborg spoke of something else, another dimension—an invisible tear between souls.

He turned the page, seeking relief or refutation. He found the opposite:

Quando amor conjugialis per adulteria dissolvitur, fit separatio animorum; conjunctio enim animorum facit conjugium, et cum hoc destruitur, remanet tantum conjunctio exterius, quae est conjunctionis apparens.

When conjugal love is dissolved by adultery, there is a separation of souls; for the union of souls constitutes the marriage, and when that is destroyed, only an outward union remains, a mere appearance of union. — §320

He leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes. It wasn't the first time he'd read about the soul, but this time it wasn't an abstract idea. He thought of the weeks that had followed with Nancy: silent meals, restrained gestures, glacial politeness. Nothing had exploded, and yet everything was broken.

When Nancy announced that an important loan executive from Medellín, whom she had met at a conference, had offered her a job as manager, Hernando went back to the book as if following someone else's confession:

Inter conjuges ubi amor conjugialis cessavit, nascitur animositas et odium; hoc enim ex separatione animorum oritur.

Between spouses where conjugal love has ceased, animosity and hatred arise;

these come from the separation of souls. — §426

Animositas.

The word stuck in his mind. It was exact, evading "resentment" or "bitterness" to capture that cold, cutting current seeping between two souls unnoticed. What had once been tenderness turned into impatience, into boredom, into a wish for distance.

And it all happened without scandal, without visible cause.

Just a slow withdrawal of light.

He looked back toward the window. Rain beat the glass with a hypnotic cadence.

On the reverse page, he read, almost by chance:

Amor conjugialis facit ut duo animae fiant una, et duo corda unum; unde fit quod conjuges in coelo sint sicut unus homo.

Conjugal love causes two souls to become one and two hearts one; thus it is that married partners in heaven are as one person. — §156

Truth written by someone who claimed to have seen beyond the skin of men: every infidelity is a rupture. Not only of bodies, but of spiritual substance. The bonds that tear between two bodies continue pulsing as open wounds in the world of the spirit. He and Nancy were no longer one being, but two torn halves, each bleeding on its own.

He could blame Nancy, but hadn't he, in his eagerness to get her to have more sex, allowed her to catch him visiting one of those new mutual-masturbation sites online? It didn't matter that he was only watching out of curiosity, fascinated by the pathetic intimacy of strangers—which, in any case, was capricious and cruel unless you were a diva or a stud. Nancy had convinced herself he was having virtual sex with imagined lovers.

And now, he was paying with someone else's flesh.

He set the volume on the desk and left it there, open in the middle, as if the room itself needed to keep reading it.

Swedenborg spoke of marriage, yes, but Hernando understood the concept reached beyond contracts, and that a man of the eighteenth century couldn't think outside the limits of his patriarchal morality.

It was about the coexistence of two beings who had once shared destiny, dreams, and flesh.

And he and Nancy, though they'd never signed papers, had lived together long enough to have been a single life—or to feel the tearing now of having been one.

Now he wondered if Nancy's refusal to marry had been a premonition, a way to keep an escape hatch open. Maybe she had always known this would end badly.

But it all ended two months ago, in the simplest and most brutal way.

Nancy came home on a Friday afternoon after a week in Medellín. Hernando was in the living room reading when he heard the key in the lock. She walked in with her suitcase, but instead of leaving it in the bedroom as always, she set it down next to the door.

"We need to talk," she said.

Hernando knew from her tone that this wouldn't be another argument about who'd left the milk out or the electricity bill. Her voice carried something final.

"What's wrong?" he asked, closing the book.

Nancy sat on the edge of the couch without taking off her shoes, without relaxing. She was tense, shoulders rigid, hands intertwined in her lap.

"I'm leaving," she said simply.

"Leaving where? Another conference?"

"No. I'm leaving here. This house."

Hernando felt the floor open under his feet. He knew things were bad, that they had spent months barely speaking, barely looking at each other. But knowing it was one thing; hearing it out loud, definite, irreversible, was another.

"Why?"

Nancy sighed, ran a hand through her hair. She looked tired, worn out, as if she'd been rehearsing this moment for weeks.

"But we'll still be together, Hernando. We'll still be boyfriend and girlfriend. We'll just prioritize our careers. We're only twenty-seven."

Hernando knew the job had been given to her by a fifty-eight-year-old man, so he inferred Nancy was his lover and he, Hernando, her apparent consort—the one who satisfied her in

bed, the real lover, but not sufficiently.

"And me?" Hernando asked, feeling pathetic. "You're not afraid I'll fall in love with someone else?"

"I know you love me," Nancy said, standing up. "And I'll love you too, from a distance. You don't have to worry about that."

Hernando replayed their lovemaking sessions in the living room, staring at the closed door, listening to the echo of Nancy's footsteps after orgasm, her steps down the hallway, the elevator, her laughter—now a physical absence, oppressive, unbearable.

He tried to go on with his life: work, eat, sleep. But everything felt empty, mechanical, meaningless. His visits to prostitutes intensified. He no longer waited for Nancy to travel—because Nancy was simply gone. He went out whenever the void became unbearable.

That night he had drunk more than usual. Two bottles of whiskey, maybe three. He'd lost track. He stayed in a bar until they kicked him out, wandered drunk through Bucaramanga's streets, ended up in the main park when dawn was just beginning to tinge the sky gray.

It was nearly sunrise when Hernando—blue shirt untucked, tie knot hanging loose like a badly tied memory—paced the park. At that hour, the city park is an orchestra of palms bending in the wind, vendors stacking chairs, a man gathering trays of cold empanadas, the distant echo of a DJ packing the night into crates.

Hernando leaned against the trunk of a palm, felt the world spin, and let himself sink onto the damp grass. The dew soaked his pants. He didn't care. He didn't care about anything.

That's when he saw her: a young woman, generously overripe curves, foreign features betraying a Venezuelan accent, smoking against a bench. She looked like a teenager but her gaze said she was in her mid-twenties, maybe twenty-five, someone who moved with the guarded alertness of a person who knew the night and its rules. She wore a short red dress, high heels, a small purse hanging from a gold chain over her shoulder.

She approached with the ease of someone who knows how to read fallen bodies.

"Hey, *papi*," she said with a smile that didn't demand, only

confirmed. "Got a light?"

Hernando, dazed, answered with the first thing that came to mind:

"Nancy."

The woman frowned.

"Nancy? You calling me Nancy?"

"I can call you Nancy," Hernando said, pulling out his wallet with clumsy fingers. "How much?"

She glanced at the wallet, evaluating its contents with the speed of someone who's done that math a thousand times.

"One fifty an hour," she said, firm on the rate; transactions were her native tongue.

Hernando opened the wallet and began counting bills. He had about two hundred thousand pesos, maybe a little more. The bills were wrinkled, damp with sweat, but the woman didn't seem to mind.

"Let's go to a hotel, *papi*," she said. "We can't do it here…"

Before she could finish, a group of young men passed behind her. Four, maybe five, wearing soccer jerseys and cocked caps. One of them, the stockiest, with acne scars and ugly tattoos on his arms, saw the bills in Hernando's hand.

"Hey, old man," he said, approaching with a slow, threatening gait. "What's all that money?"

Hernando tried to shove the bills back into his wallet, but his movements were slow, uncoordinated from the alcohol. The guy lunged, snatched the wallet from his hand. The bills flew out and landed on the wet grass like autumn leaves.

"Give that back!" Hernando shouted, trying to stand, falling again.

Another guy shoved him. Hernando felt a fist in his ribs, another in his face. The metallic taste of blood filled his mouth. The woman, instead of fleeing, dropped quickly to the ground and snatched one of the bills midair with professional reflexes. She held it between her fingers as if it were proof the transaction still stood.

"Drop it, bitch!" the stocky one yelled.

"It's mine," she shot back. "The gentleman gave it to me."

The guy lunged at her. He grabbed her arm, tried to tear the bill

away. She resisted, scratched his face, spat at him. He shoved her against the bench, but she recovered quickly, with the agility of someone who has survived worse. She reached into her purse and pulled out something that flashed briefly under the streetlights.

A small folding knife. A defensive weapon, not an offensive one; the kind women who work the streets carry because they know the night is full of predators.

"Back off!" she shouted, brandishing the blade with a firm hand—not trembling like a victim's, but steady, like someone who'd had to use it before.

From the shadows, a voice roared:

"¡Los tombos!"

The street monster—a pimp emerging as if he'd been waiting for this moment, or maybe just another member of the gang—wasn't lying. In the distance, moving along the main avenue, a police car approached with its lights off, making its routine rounds. The boys saw it at the same time.

"Let's go!" one of them shouted.

The group scattered, running in different directions, some jumping onto motorcycles waiting on the far side of the park, others vanishing down dark alleyways. Mouths yelling, engines roaring, the chaos of the early morning becoming a stampede.

But the stocky boy didn't run. Not right away. He stayed in front of the woman, staring at her with pure hatred, with the rage of someone whose easy night's business has just been ruined.

"Give me that bill, bitch," he hissed.

"No," she replied firmly.

"Give it to me or I'll kill you."

He reached under his shirt, at his waistband, and pulled out something that made Hernando's heart stop: a small revolver, one of those cheap ones you can buy on any corner, the metal worn and rusted but just as lethal.

"Last chance," he said, aiming at her chest.

She stepped back but kept the knife raised. It was ridiculous, absurd: a pocketknife against a revolver. But she didn't look willing to surrender what she'd earned "honestly," even if *honestly* in this context had its own particular meaning.

"Drop it!" Hernando shouted from the ground, finally finding his voice as he dragged himself toward them. "Leave her alone!"

The guy glanced at him with contempt, then turned back to the woman. He ripped the purse from her shoulder with a violent jerk. She clung to the gold chain, fought back, shouted something in her Venezuelan accent Hernando couldn't make out. The chain tightened, tightened more, and finally snapped with a metallic crack.

But in the struggle, as the boy pulled with one hand on the purse and held the gun in the other, her knife met his arm. It wasn't a deliberate stab; it was the accident of the tussle. The blade grazed his forearm, leaving a shallow cut that barely bled—but it enraged him as if she'd stabbed him straight through the heart.

"Damn bitch!" he roared.

He raised the revolver. Aimed straight at her chest. The world stopped. Hernando saw it all with terrible clarity: the boy's finger squeezing the trigger, the challenging expression on the woman's face slowly turning to fear, the glint of the streetlights on the oxidized metal of the gun.

"Nancy, drop it!" Hernando screamed, voice torn, confusing this woman once again with the ghost that haunted him.

The shot cracked, dry and final, like a clock stopping forever. The sound ricocheted off the surrounding buildings, multiplied, expanded, becoming an echo that seemed never-ending.

The woman's eyes flew open, wide, startled, disbelieving. She brought her hands to her chest where the bullet had entered. Blood seeped between her fingers, dark, almost black under the yellow streetlights. The twenty-thousand-peso bill she had fought for so fiercely slipped from her hand, floated in the air for a second, then landed on the wet grass.

The boy froze, staring at what he'd done. The revolver still smoked in his hand. For a second it looked like he might say something, justify himself, or bolt. But then the police car, which had accelerated when it heard the shot, drove into the park, siren now wailing, emergency lights flooding the scene like a macabre stage.

"Freeze! Police!" shouted the officer on the driver's side,

climbing out with his gun drawn and aimed at the boy.

The second cop stepped out from the other side, weapon in hand, moving to flank the shooter.

The boy turned. He saw both guns trained on him. Panic hit. Instead of dropping the revolver, instead of surrendering, he raised it. Not necessarily to shoot—maybe just to run, maybe a clumsy, defensive gesture—but the movement was enough.

"Drop the weapon!" the first officer ordered. "Drop it now!"

The boy didn't obey. He turned his body, the gun swinging vaguely toward the officers—or maybe he was just looking for a way out. It didn't matter. The two policemen fired almost at the same time.

The first shot hit his shoulder, spinning him like a top. The second tore through his chest, right below the clavicle. The third—because the first cop fired twice—struck his back as he was falling.

He collapsed face down on the grass. The revolver flew from his hand and landed several yards away. His body convulsed once, twice, then went still. A pool of blood formed beneath his chest, spreading slowly, soaking into the soil.

"Code red! Code red!" one of the officers shouted into his radio. "Shots fired, two civilians down. We need an ambulance at the main park right now. Right now!"

But Hernando didn't hear the cops' voices or the sirens converging on the park from different parts of the city. He saw only the woman, who had dropped to her knees on the grass, clutching her chest as if she could hold in the life gushing out between her fingers.

He crawled to her. The alcohol had drained from his system, replaced by a brutal sobriety sharp as a blade. He gathered her in his arms with a desperate tenderness, cradling her like a child.

"Nancy," he whispered over and over. "Nancy, forgive me. Nancy, don't leave. Please don't leave."

She looked at him. Her eyes, already clouding with approaching death, showed confusion first, then something like compassion. She tried to speak. Her lips moved, forming soundless words. Only blood emerged from her mouth, blackish blood that stained her lips, ran down her chin, soaked the red dress until it turned darker,

almost purple.

"Sir," one of the officers said, approaching with caution. "Sir, we need to check her. Let me…"

"No!" Hernando screamed, tightening his hold. "Don't take her from me! Nancy, stay with me!"

The cop, a young man with only a few years on the force, exchanged a glance with his partner. He had seen a lot on Bucaramanga's streets, but this was different. This man wasn't a criminal, not even an accomplice. He was simply broken—someone who had been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"Sir," he said more softly. "Let me help her. Please."

But it was too late to help. The woman convulsed one last time in Hernando's arms. Her entire body tightened, arched backward, then vomited a jet of black blood that drenched his chest, neck, face. The hot, viscous liquid soaked his shirt, burned his skin like acid.

And in that instant, she stopped moving. Her eyes stayed open, staring at the sky where the stars were beginning to fade with the coming dawn. But there was nothing behind those eyes anymore. Only emptiness, the absolute silence of death.

Hernando held her for several more minutes. He didn't cry. He couldn't. He had gone beyond tears, to a place where pain was so total it had turned into numbness, into the absence of any feeling at all.

The park filled with people. More cops arrived in other patrol cars. An ambulance pulled in, red and blue lights painting everything in pulses of color. Paramedics ran in with stretchers and medical kits, but slowed when they saw the scene: a man covered in blood cradling a corpse, another body face down a few feet away, two officers standing with guns still in hand, caught between shock and professional protocol.

"She's dead," one paramedic said after checking the woman. "No pulse. No breathing."

"The kid too," his partner reported, kneeling beside the boy. "Multiple gunshot wounds. Massive blood loss."

The detective who arrived fifteen minutes later was named Ramírez. He was in his fifties, with a rumpled jacket and a cigarette

smell he couldn't hide. He'd seen everything in twenty-five years on the job: crimes of passion, score-settling, absurd accidents. But something about this scene unsettled him in a specific way.

He walked over to Hernando, who now sat cross-legged on the grass, bloodied hands resting on his thighs. The woman had been covered with a white sheet already turning red.

"Sir," Ramírez said, crouching with difficulty. "I'm Detective Ramírez. I need you to tell me what happened."

Hernando looked up. His eyes were empty, lost somewhere far away.

"I called her Nancy," he said in a hoarse voice. "That wasn't her name. I don't know her name. But I called her Nancy."

"Nancy is your wife?" Ramírez asked.

"No. Nancy left me. Two months ago. Left because a man bought her with a job offer. But I still… I still call her. Like I could summon her. Like saying her name enough times might bring her back."

The detective pulled out a notebook and started writing. But there was compassion in his eyes, not the cold judgment of a hardened cop.

"Did you know the victim?" he asked.

"No. I just met her. Five minutes earlier. She offered me her services. I pulled out my wallet and then they showed up."

"The attackers?"

"Yes. They wanted the money. She fought them. She had a knife. He had a gun. And, well… you know."

He couldn't go on. His voice finally broke. The tears he'd been holding back burst forth, uncontrollable, mixing with the dried blood on his face.

"It's all right," Ramírez said, resting a hand on his shoulder. "It's all right. You don't have to talk now. We'll take you to the station. You can make a formal statement when you're calmer."

"I killed Nancy," Hernando murmured. "Not this Nancy. My Nancy. I killed her slowly, over three years. I killed her with my indifference, with my suspicions, with my trips to… places like this. And now she's gone. And this other Nancy, this one who wasn't even Nancy, died because I pulled out cash in the park at five in

the morning."

"You didn't kill anyone," Ramírez said firmly. "You were the victim of a robbery. You witnessed a homicide. That's it."

But Hernando shook his head. He knew better. He knew that if he hadn't been there, drunk and desperate, looking for the ghost of the woman who left him in the body of a stranger, none of this would have happened. This woman would still be alive. She'd be seeing another client, or heading home after a long night, or counting her earnings in some cheap hotel room.

Instead, she lay dead under a white sheet, a bloodstained twenty-thousand-peso bill next to her body.

The forensic team arrived half an hour later. They took photos, measured distances, marked evidence with small numbered yellow markers. The boy's revolver went into a plastic bag. The officers' shell casings were collected. The woman's knife was tagged and stored.

"Identity of the victim?" one of the forensics techs asked.

A cop rummaged through the purse lying on the grass, now missing its broken chain. He pulled out a Venezuelan ID card, laminated and already worn at the edges.

"María Rodríguez," he read. "Twenty-four. Venezuelan citizen."

Not Nancy. María. She had a real name, a real story, a life that had ended on the damp grass of a park in Bucaramanga, thousands of kilometers from her country, her family, any place she might once have called home.

"Family?" Ramírez asked.

"No contact information. Just the address of a hotel downtown."

María Rodríguez. Twenty-four. Hernando repeated the name in his head, trying to etch it there, to honor at least in memory this woman who had died in his arms. But even now, the name blurred, dissolving into Nancy. As if the two women had fused into one symbol—of everything he had lost, everything he had ruined.

They put him in a patrol car. Took him to the station. Questioned him for two hours, recording every word, making him repeat details, checking for inconsistencies. Hernando told them

everything: the breakup with Nancy, the whiskey, the park, meeting María, the mugging, the shots.

"Did you hire Ms. Rodríguez's services?" the prosecutor supervising the case asked.

"I was going to," Hernando replied. "I took out the money. But we didn't… consummate anything."

"How often do you hire prostitutes?" the prosecutor asked.

Hernando hesitated. He could lie. Say it was his first time, a momentary lapse. But he was tired of lying. Tired of hiding, of justifying, of building elaborate façades to cover the truth.

"Often," he admitted. "Every time my partner traveled, for three years. And after she left me, more often—two or three times a week."

The prosecutor wrote that down, expressionless. For him it was just another data point, another piece in the legal puzzle he had to assemble.

"Have you ever had problems? Any prior incident?" he asked.

"No. It was always… transactional. No complications."

"Until tonight."

"Until tonight."

They released him at dawn. There were no charges against him. He was a victim and a witness, nothing more. The officers who had fired would be investigated—standard procedure—but it was clear they had acted in self-defense and in protection of civilians. The case would be closed as a justified homicide.

Hernando stepped out of the station when the sun was already high. Bucaramanga woke around him: street vendors setting up stands, students rushing to school, traffic starting its daily cacophony. Life went on, indifferent to what had happened in the park a few hours earlier.

He walked home. His shirt was still stained with blood, now dry and stiff. People moved away as he passed, with looks of alarm or disgust. But Hernando didn't care. He didn't feel anything.

The following days filled up with paperwork, court appointments, meetings with the public defender assigned to him, and sessions with psychologists asking how he felt, if he was sleeping, if he needed medication for anxiety. Hernando answered

in monosyllables, signed where they told him to sign, nodded when they explained there were no charges and he was free to go on with his life.

But there was no life to go back to.

The story made the papers. Not on the front page—in Bucaramanga, violence is too common for that—but in the city section: "Two Dead in Attempted Robbery at Main Park." The details were sparse, names reduced to initials out of respect for the families. But Hernando knew that in the neighborhoods, corner stores, taxis, people were talking. The story grew, twisted, inflated itself, took on a life of its own.

3. *Psychology of heartbreak*

A few days later, in a ample office bathed in natural light that poured through panoramic windows overlooking the noisy streets of Bucaramanga, Hernando was sitting at his desk with the look of a man who had fought an endless inner battle. His face, usually sharp and expressive, now looked neat but hollow-eyed, marked by insomnia and the weight of a wounded heart. A white bandage covered the bridge of his nose, a reminder of the punch in the park, of María's hot blood soaking his shirt: the only visible mark from the night he hit rock bottom.

With a trembling hand he signed the pencil-drawn design of an architectural plan, precise lines that represented a modern building, a project that demanded all his attention but, at that moment, felt like nothing more than a pretext not to think about Nancy.

His co-worker Ariadna – a practical, straightforward woman who did interior design at the same firm – came over to his drafting table with a worried expression.

"My God, Hernando. What happened to your face?" she asked, pointing at her own cheek to indicate the spot. "You look like a retired boxer."

Hernando shifted his gaze to the blueprint, as if he had suddenly discovered a critical error in one of the beams.

"Nothing. A little mishap," he muttered.

"A mishap doesn't leave you with that bruise. You can see it from a mile away."

He touched the bandage that barely hid the swollen purple under his eye.

"It was a mugging. Nothing important. In the main park. A week ago."

Ariadna crossed her arms and planted herself firmly in front of him.

"A mugging? In the main park? But that place is always

busy. Did they take everything?"

"Yes… well, no. The wallet, the phone… the usual," he lied, avoiding her eyes and fixing on an indeterminate point on the window.

"And you didn't go to the police? You have to report that."

"Everything's already sorted, Ariadna, really. I don't want to dwell on it."

"How can you *not* dwell on it? You get assaulted and you act as if you'd bumped into a door. That's not normal, Hernando. You're pale, your eyes are gone… and you haven't been yourself for months."

"It's the projects, I'm overloaded," he argued, spinning a pencil between his fingers nervously. "Stress, you know."

"This isn't work stress," she replied, lowering her voice. "It's something else. And it's not just today. You've been like this since Nancy… well. Since the whole Nancy thing."

At the sound of the name, Hernando stiffened. A dull veil of pain clouded his eyes for an instant.

"It has nothing to do with Nancy," he said, with a firmness that sounded fragile and forced.

Ariadna looked at him with a mix of exasperation and pity. She sighed, and her tone softened, taking on a suddenly almost maternal warmth.

"Look, I know you can't stand drama. And I'm not going to push. But at least listen to me on this: I have a cousin, Doctor Yasmín Haddad, she's a psychologist. She's excellent, very discreet."

"I'm not crazy…"

"Go, Hernando. She helped a friend of mine with her daughter. You can't go on like this, shaking over blueprints. She's Jungian; she'll help you see what's behind all this mess."

Ariadna spoke with the certainty of someone who had seen a miracle up close. Her friend Lucía had been a desperate mother: her daughter Valentina, sixteen, had fallen into a spiral of drugs and lust that seemed bottomless. It started with cigarettes stolen at school parties, moved to marijuana in neighbourhood

parks, and ended in ecstasy and cocaine at clandestine raves in Bucaramanga's rougher districts. Valentina went out with a party gang – older boys and girls with noisy motorbikes and improvised tattoos – who took her to cheap motels and abandoned houses where the music pounded until dawn. Sometimes Lucía would find her at noon, eyes bloodshot, clothes crumpled, a smell of alcohol and sex clinging to her skin.

One night, Lucía decided to follow her. She saw her go into a house in the La Joya neighbourhood, a two-storey building with flickering neon lights and music that made the windows shake. She waited until three in the morning, when the door opened and Valentina stumbled out, dress torn and makeup smeared. Lucía burst inside. What she saw left her breathless: an orgy in the main room. Naked bodies intertwined on filthy mattresses, empty bottles rolling on the floor, syringes in a corner. Valentina was in the middle, laughing hysterically while one boy passed her a joint and another kissed her neck.

Lucía dragged her home amid screams and tears. The next day she took her to Doctor Yasmín Haddad. Valentina showed up defiant, headphones on, radiating "this is a waste of time." Yasmín didn't judge her. She listened. She asked questions. And then, in a session alone with Lucía, she said something that sounded insane:

"Valentina isn't sick. She's living out an archetype. The Maiden in the Underworld. Forbidding her will only push her deeper. Give her freedom. Supervised, yes, but freedom. Let her cross her Threshold, let her face her Belly of the Whale. If you lock her up, she'll stay there forever. If you let her go, with clear limits but without chains, she'll come back transformed."

At first Lucía didn't understand. She thought the psychologist was crazy. But Yasmín insisted:

"The unconscious doesn't lie. Valentina needs to live her myth, not have it cut short. Accompany her, don't stop her."

So Lucía did. She stopped searching Valentina's room. Stopped checking her phone. Gave her a flexible curfew, but with one condition: every Friday Valentina had to tell her everything. No lies. No judgements. Just the truth.

The first months were hell. Valentina went out, came back

high, threw up in the bathroom, cried in the kitchen at five in the morning. But she talked. She told. And Lucía listened. Without yelling. Without punishment. She only asked: "What did you feel? What were you looking for there?"

Yasmín saw Valentina once a week. She talked to her about Campbell, about how Persephone descended to the underworld and came back changed; about how Inanna stripped off her jewels, layer by layer, until she hit bottom and was reborn.

"You're in the descent," she told her. "Don't fight it. Live your symbolic death. But remember: the hero always comes back."

Valentina began to draw. Furious mandalas, full of red and black. Later, calmer ones – blues, greens. She began to write in a notebook Yasmín gave her. Poems. Fragments.

"I drown in myself and no one sees me," she wrote once. *"But today I saw an orange fish in the fountain at the office and thought: it's trapped too, but it still swims."*

One day, Valentina didn't go out. She stayed home. She read *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. She underlined sentences. She cried. The following Friday she told Lucía:

"I don't want to go anymore. It's not fun. It's empty."

Lucía didn't celebrate. She just nodded.

"When you want to talk, I'm here."

Valentina quit drugs. Not all at once – little by little. The party friends kept looking for her, but she stopped answering. She started painting. Studying art at the UIS. Today, at twenty-two, she exhibits in local galleries. She has a steady boyfriend. And every time Lucía walks past Yasmín's office, she leaves a little box of Lebanese sweets as thanks.

That was what Ariadna told Hernando, in a low voice, in the office break room while she drank black coffee.

"Valentina was a wreck. Lucía thought she was losing her. But Yasmín didn't save her by forbidding her. She saved her by letting her fall. And fall. Until she hit bottom and decided to climb out on her own. It worked, Hernando. It worked."

Doctor Yasmín Haddad's office was on the seventh floor of a building facing Parque de las Palmas, in the heart of Bucaramanga. The lacquered oak walls gave it a cosy feel, with a

small fountain whose water slid rhythmically down a wall of smooth slabs into a pool lit by blue and green lights, where beautiful koi fish swam – orange, white, black, their spots like constellations. A large Portuguese desk imported from Africa, inlaid with carved elephants and palms, stood out over a Persian rug in wine and ochre tones. Near the huge window, a fin-de-siècle chaise longue upholstered in moss-green velvet invited repose, next to a deep red leather armchair that felt like a hug. A donkey-ear plant, a bright almost unreal green, rose in a clay pot by the window, contrasting with the eclectic décor: an electric fireplace burning against one wall, its fake flames dancing silently, casting warm shadows over framed reproductions in gilded aluminium. From the window you could see the crowns of the palm trees swaying in the warm afternoon breeze. The ivory-coloured walls were decorated with an original lithograph of Dalí's *The Persistence of Memory*, an ink drawing by Klee, and a black-and-white photograph of Carl Jung himself smoking a pipe.

Hernando had arrived on time, though unwilling, pushed by Ariadna's words:

"Valentina came back, Hernando. Really came back. Not because they forced her. Because she chose to. Yasmín doesn't heal with rules. She heals with myths. With space. With truth. Go. For you. For your blueprints. For your nights. Go."

"Sit down, Hernando," said Yasmín, pointing to the worn leather couch. Her voice was serene, with a slight Caribbean lilt that revealed her roots in Sincelejo, softened by years of deep reading and introspective conversation. "Your colleague Ariadna told me about you. She says you're her best drafter, but lately you can't draw a line without your hand shaking."

"Lately I've wanted to die," Hernando admitted. "Since that night in the park. Since a woman died in my arms because I pulled out money to… to hire her."

Doctor Yasmín Haddad was a forty-five-year-old blonde woman, with thick thighs and generous curves that suggested African ancestry mixed with her family's Lebanese blood, a graduate of the Universidad Metropolitana in Barranquilla. She dressed with professional, feminine elegance: a fitted black blazer

over an ivory silk blouse that just hinted at the lace of a discreet bra, a pearl-grey pencil skirt that hugged her hips without tightening, and low black leather heels that enhanced her posture without sacrificing comfort. A Lebanese gold necklace with a small Hand of Fatima hung at her neckline, and her nails, painted a subtle dark red, held her notebook firmly.

She had become a Jungian by her own initiative, drawn first by Joseph Campbell's books on the power of myth – especially *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* – which led her to explore Jung's archetypes as universal manifestations of the heroic cycle: the journey we all undertake from the Call to Adventure to the Return with the Elixir.

Her blond hair fell in soft waves over her shoulders, and her dark eyes, inherited from Lebanese ancestors, projected an intuitive warmth that contrasted with the analytical precision of her words.

Hernando had checked her website the night before while drinking water mixed with soda, and there she boasted of an initial self-taught formation through Campbell, later complemented by formal studies in Barranquilla.

"And what do you do in those sleepless hours?" she asked.

Hernando hesitated before answering.

"I think. And I write. Poems, mostly. I've always done it, since I was a teenager. It's my secret passion. But now… now it's the only thing keeping me sane. Or insane, I'm no longer sure which."

"May I read one?"

Hernando took a worn notebook with yellowed pages from his briefcase. He opened it with trembling hands and read in a broken voice:

My heart, prematurely wounded,
falls silent while I smile at her departure,
unable, out of pride, to renounce
the kisses and farewells she laid upon me.

Yasmín nodded slowly, making notes in her leather pad.

"You write well. Do you plan to publish them someday?"

"Maybe. When they're worthy. When the pain has distilled into something… beautiful, true. The great poets always wrote from suffering, didn't they? Petrarch, Bécquer, Larra… They all suffered for love."

"You read a lot of poetry then?"

"It's my true passion," Hernando confessed. "More than architecture, sometimes, as terrible as that sounds. I've read all the great romantics. Their biographies, their intimate letters, their last words. Petrarch writing three hundred and sixty-six sonnets to a married woman who never looked at him. Bécquer dying poor and tubercular, abandoned. Larra putting a bullet in his head because Dolores Armijo left him. Byron dying far from England for loves that betrayed him. Keats wasting away over Fanny Brawne. Rimbaud renouncing poetry out of the pain of Verlaine. Poe destroyed by Virginia's death… Aren't their sacrifices for love beautiful, worthy of being remembered?"

Yasmín said nothing; she only smiled.

The first sessions were all confessions. Hernando recited his own verses and those of the poets he admired, while narrating his relationship with Nancy in every detail. Yasmín listened, nodded, and took notes, guided by her interest in how Campbell's myths – the Call to Adventure, the Threshold, the Trials, the Belly of the Whale – interwove with Jungian archetypes.

After two months, she finally answered his initial question.

"They all died shattered," said Yasmín.

"Yes. All of them. But they left us immortal works."

"And Nancy? Does she suffer too? Do you think she feels immortalised in your verses?"

Hernando dropped his gaze.

"Nancy left, even if she thinks she'll come back. And yes, I think she will when she discovers the bitterness of being the secondary lover. But we've already talked about that."

"You may repeat your speculations," Yasmín nodded. "Remember, when you feel the need to say something, don't hold back. Many people, especially young people, think it's enough to tell everything once because speech is for communication, for

information. But no: speaking is always therapeutic. When you speak, you're healing, and those who repeat the same stories don't do it because they have bad memory, but because their mental state demands it. Never keep quiet, least of all with your psychologist. Besides, a story is never told the same way twice; new elements appear to illuminate it, roots from the past sprout and give a clearer shape to what we've lived."

Hernando smiled, relieved to have found a woman who didn't make him feel ashamed for re-formulating the complaints that tormented him.

"She left for Medellín. A job opportunity, bank manager. She told me we'd continue our relationship at a distance, but I knew it was the end. I begged her to stay. I got down on my knees, doctor. I knelt in our communal garage like a beggar, like a character in a novel."

"Were you drinking heavily?"

"About a litre a day. Vodka, mostly. Like Poe with bourbon. Musset with absinthe. But I already told you in our previous talks how I quit."

"Alcohol doesn't dilute pain, it only postpones it."

"I know, doctor. I gave it up to heal my nightmares, but above all my rage and grief: they're worse than the insomnia."

There was a dense silence. Outside, in Parque de las Palmas, children were shouting as they played among the palm trees while the afternoon sun began to set over Bucaramanga.

Yasmín took off her glasses and polished them with a silk handkerchief before continuing.

"I've been thinking about your case for two months, ever since Ariadna called me and sent me some of your poems by email. There's something I'd like to propose to you, an interpretation that might be… illuminating, though I'm not sure you'll accept it."

The session ended and they agreed to meet the next day.

As soon as he lay down on the therapeutic couch, Yasmín, with a cup of strong black coffee – an inheritance of her Lebanese roots – sat with her notebook.

"This is a theory I've developed over my years of practice," she said, "something heterodox even by Jungian

standards, inspired by the way Joseph Campbell saw myths as a universal monomyth: the hero's journey with its inevitable stages – the Ordinary World, the Call to Adventure, the Refusal of the Call, Meeting the Mentor, the Trials, the Belly of the Whale, the Transformation, the Return with the Elixir. But first, allow me to bring back what you told me about Nancy, to 'balance perspectives,' as you put it." She smiled faintly. "Your girlfriend – or ex-girlfriend, whichever you prefer – has described herself as a feminist for years, influenced by authors like Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, and more recently, in this 2005 we're living in, by figures widely read in academic circles such as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* or bell hooks's *Feminism Is for Everybody*. She quotes Butler to argue that gender is performative, a repetition of socially constructed acts, and hooks to emphasise that feminism must include men in dismantling patriarchy, not just victimise women."

Hernando tensed on the couch, surprised by the mention.

"She uses her own words," he muttered.

"Nancy is a woman who wants to feel modern, progressive," Yasmín explained calmly, her Sincelejo accent giving her phrases a warm, flowing rhythm, "and she thinks being progressive means contradicting everything from the past, destroying it. She reminded you, with some vehemence, that we're in 2005, not in the romantic past you idealise with your nineteenth-century poets. 'We're not characters out of Petrarch or Larra,' she will have told her friends. 'Hernando lives in a world of suffering men and unreachable muse-women, but I'm not a muse. I'm a woman who chooses her path, who controls her narrative.' And she will have added that with a satisfied smile, now that she enjoys being in command of her love life with her new job in Medellín."

"With her lover," Hernando corrected.

"Perhaps yes, perhaps no, it doesn't matter. For the first time she's not the one who suffers abandonment or begs; she's the one who decides, who moves forward without looking back. She quotes Friedan to justify her escape from the domestic 'mystique' that you, unconsciously, imposed on her with your expectations of eternal devotion."

Yasmín paused, watching Hernando's reaction, before linking back to her Jungian analysis, now deeply interwoven with Campbell's monomyth.

"This takes us directly to Jung's archetypes, do you remember from our earlier talks? Universal patterns that inhabit the collective unconscious, and which Campbell structured within the hero's journey: the Hero, the Mother, the Shadow, the Wise Old Man, the Trickster, the Threshold Guardian… and the Suffering Lover, but also his counterpart: the Anima as devouring or liberating force; and in Nancy's case, an inverted projection of the archetype of the Independent Woman – or even the Goddess who refuses sacrifice – that in 2005 resonates with third-wave feminism. You, Hernando, don't love Nancy as a full individual. You love the archetype of tragic heartbreak, reinforced by centuries of patriarchal romantic literature. But Nancy, from her feminist perspective, refuses to be the passive Anima that completes the man; she embodies the collective Shadow of patriarchy, emerging to claim agency – like a heroine crossing her own Threshold and leaving behind the Ordinary World of traditional romance. Jung would speak of integrating the Anima in the man – that inner feminine figure we project onto partners – but in your case, Hernando, your Anima is stuck in the nineteenth century, idealised as a suffering or unreachable muse, while Nancy, quoting Butler, represents an empowered gender that breaks the cycle. She now holds the power, reverses the roles: she no longer suffers betrayal or abandonment; she inflicts them with conscious deliberation, enjoying the freedom that hooks defends as essential for all oppressed identities – a true Return with the Elixir for her, but for you, the Belly of the Whale. Your unintegrated Anima manifests in your poetry as compensation: you write to conjure the lost muse, but in reality you amplify the archetypal possession, turning pain into aesthetic ritual that perpetuates the psychic inflation."

Hernando frowned, feeling a mix of curiosity and irritation.

"I don't follow," he said. "Are you saying I made up my feelings? And that Nancy… enjoys this?"

"Not exactly. Let me explain." Yasmín shifted in her chair, ready to unfold her theory, her pronounced hips accentuating a fluid, earthy movement. "Think of your life before Nancy. Think of all the poets you've studied obsessively: Petrarch, Bécquer, Larra, Byron, Keats, Rimbaud, Poe, Musset… What do they have in common?"

"They all suffered for love."

"Exactly. And *you* chose them, Hernando. You chose them before meeting Nancy. Before experiencing this pain. As if your psyche were already in the Ordinary World, waiting for the Call to Adventure that would be tragic abandonment. Campbell describes how the hero always refuses the call at first, but the unconscious pushes him toward the Threshold. It's as if your unconscious had been drawing up the blueprints of your own tragic-heroic journey, the way you draft your buildings. Isn't it significant that an architect – a man of structures, plans, calculations, exact measurements – secretly dedicates his life, his 'true passion' as you yourself say, to venerating tragic poets who lived out their own version of suffering? Meanwhile Nancy, in 2005, quotes Beauvoir to remind us that 'one is not born a woman, one becomes one,' and refuses to be the Anima in your story. She delights in the control because, at last, she isn't the victim of your Anima projection; she is the author of her story, integrating her own empowered Shadow – crossing her Threshold into an Extraordinary World where *she* is the heroine, not the damsel."

Hernando shivered.

"You're saying I *looked* for this? That I somehow wanted to suffer? And that Nancy knows that, uses it?"

"I'm saying your unconscious recognised in Nancy the perfect opportunity to activate the archetype of the Suffering Lover, as a hero who must face the Supreme Trial of abandonment in order to be reborn – or perish, like many of your poets. A beautiful, intelligent woman, but emotionally distant from the start, influenced by the academic feminism that's booming in 2005. A woman who, from the beginning, made it clear that her independence was her most precious asset, that she would never allow herself to be domesticated – the Threshold Guardian you

were supposed to cross, but instead you remained in the Refusal of the Call, clinging to the romantic Ordinary World. You didn't choose her *despite* that, Hernando. You chose her *because* of it. Your unconscious knew she was the perfect profile to abandon you one day, giving you the experience of tragic heartbreak you needed to complete your identity as poet – the Belly of the Whale where the hero dies symbolically. But Nancy, conscious and feminist, flips the archetype: she quotes Friedan to escape the passive Anima trap, hooks to include (or exclude) on equal terms, and enjoys the power of not suffering, of not being the one who begs – her own Return with the Elixir of agency. We're in 2005, Hernando, not in 1837 with Larra. The world has changed; women like Nancy control it now, forcing men to integrate their inner feminine instead of projecting it – she has already completed her monomyth, while you remain stuck in the Refusal."

"It makes sense," Hernando faltered, feeling something inside him violently resist the idea. "But I loved her. I love her. Every fibre of my being loves her. You can't reduce what I feel to some… psychological mechanism. And she… does she enjoy watching me suffer?"

"Do you love *her*? Or do you love the chance to become one of those accursed poets you worship so much, heroes who failed their Transformation and stayed in the Belly of the Whale?" Yasmín let the question float in the air like smoke, her warm Sincelejo cadence adding a layer of intuitive empathy. "Jung said that when an archetype possesses us, we stop being individuals and become masks, and Campbell would see it as the hero trapped in the Trials without a Mentor to guide him to the Elixir. You've become the mask of the Tragic Lover. You write lines like Bécquer, drink like Poe, kneel like a character from a nineteenth-century romance. By day you design functional buildings, meeting the practical demands of your profession, but by night you build your own poetic tragedy, brick by brick, verse by verse – an Extraordinary World you yourself invented, but never return from. Doesn't it all seem too… perfect? Too literary to be genuine? It's as if you were living not your own life, but Larra's or Byron's, heroes who died in their Supreme Ordeal. Nancy, for her part,

incarnates Butler's liberation: she controls the relationship, enjoys not being the suffering Anima, and reminds us that we're in 2005, with feminism questioning old roles and demanding that men integrate their inner feminine instead of projecting it – she has already completed her heroic journey."

Hernando suddenly stood up, knocking over the glass of water on the side table.

"My pain is real, doctor! Real like these tears, like this anguish that chokes me every damned morning! Real like the blueprints I can't draw because my hands shake! Real like the nights I wake up screaming her name! Real like the vodka I drank so I wouldn't feel this emptiness devouring me from inside!"

"I never said your pain wasn't real," Yasmín replied with unruffled calm, used to her patients' emotional explosions, her maternal gaze radiating solid earthiness. "I said it's amplified, stylised, ritualised by the archetype. You truly suffer, but you suffer in a *particular* way: the way a nineteenth-century romantic poet would suffer, a hero who refuses to cross the Threshold into healing. And that, Hernando, is suspicious from an analytical standpoint. You don't react like a 2005 architect from Bucaramanga who would go on blind dates with girls he meets online – that would be the Return to the Ordinary World. You choose to suffer as Mariano José de Larra did in 1837, the night Dolores Armijo left him for another, staying in the Belly of the Whale. Your suffering has a… theatrical quality. Not false, but performative. As if you were acting for an invisible audience, with no intention of finding the Elixir. Meanwhile Nancy celebrates that feminism allows her to love without submitting, to be in control without guilt, forcing the emergence of your own Anima – her Transformation complete."

Hernando began pacing around the office, agitated, almost frantic.

"If it's like you say, what are you suggesting? That all this is theatre? That Nancy meant nothing? That these three years together were just a rehearsal for a drama I wrote myself? And that she knows it, enjoys it?"

"I'm suggesting that Nancy was the catalyst, not the cause.

The real cause is your unconscious need to live this archetypal experience, like the hero who must descend to the underworld to find the Elixir – or die trying, like your poets. To be a tortured artist. To find in suffering an identity, a purpose, even an aesthetic. Think of Werther, Goethe's suicidal youth, or of his model Petrarch, or his Iberian disciple Larra: all three longed for an impossible love, then represented by the figure of the married woman. But our morality has changed. It's no longer shocking that a woman divorces to marry someone twenty years younger; no one is processed and burned for an extramarital affair, as happens to John Proctor, the protagonist of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Today the unattainable woman is the feminist, the one who openly declares she wants to free herself from men's yoke. You want to publish those poems someday, don't you? You want the world to recognise your sensitivity, your depth, your capacity to feel more intensely than others. But the great poems, according to your own conception, are born from authentic suffering – the Supreme Ordeal. So your unconscious supplied exactly the suffering you needed. It chose the perfect woman to leave you at the perfect moment, thus giving you the material you needed for your verses – the Belly of the Whale as a source of inspiration. Nancy, feminist in 2005, sees it as a lesson: 'No more women as passive Anima,' she told me, quoting Beauvoir, and she enjoys the inversion because she's integrating her animus – the masculine counterpart – actively, controlling instead of being controlled – her Return with the Elixir of freedom."

"And why the hell would I want to suffer like this?" Hernando shouted, the veins in his neck standing out. "Why would anyone in his right mind seek this hell?"

Yasmín leaned back and folded her hands over her lap, taking on the pedagogical tone of someone explaining a complex theorem, guided by Campbell's mythic narratives.

"Because the Suffering Lover has something the common architect doesn't: transcendent meaning, like the hero who returns with the treasure that transforms the Ordinary World. Your pain lifts you above mediocrity. It makes you someone special, someone worthy of being remembered, like the poets you revere – heroes

who failed in their Transformation but left the Elixir of their art. Jung called this 'psychic inflation': when the ego identifies with an archetype and receives from it a feeling of grandeur, even if it's via suffering. You design buildings that will last fifty years, perhaps a hundred if they're lucky. But poems… poems can be immortal, can't they? Petrarch died seven hundred years ago and we still read him. Bécquer is still revered. Your buildings will crumble, Hernando, but if your poems are good enough, if your pain is authentic and deep enough – if you complete your Ordeal – you could attain a form of immortality. And your unconscious knows it; it drives you into the journey. Nancy, by contrast, seeks immortality in her agency: she controls her love life, enjoys not repeating the patterns Butler criticises, integrating archetypes consciously in 2005 – her monomyth already concluded."

Hernando stopped in front of Jung's photograph, staring at the severe face of the Swiss psychologist, sensing something stirring in the depths of his being, something dark and disturbing he didn't want to recognise.

"I'll have to accept your reading, doctor. It's overwhelmingly accurate, although also too… reductionist. It makes everything I feel look like a calculated farce. As if I were a fraud, a fake pretending to be a tragic poet. Nancy was real. My love for her was real. You can't reduce all that to an archetypal mechanism."

"It's not a farce," Yasmín agreed patiently, her Lebanese ancestry adding a shade of ancestral wisdom. "It's a deeper truth than you think. Archetypes are as real as mountains or rivers, or as the myths Campbell collected across cultures – the same pattern in Gilgamesh, Odysseus, Luke Skywalker. They are the fundamental structures of the human psyche. But recognising them is the first step to freeing yourself from their rule – the Meeting with the Mentor you're having now. As long as you believe Nancy is the centre of your tragedy, you'll remain her prisoner in the Belly of the Whale. When you understand that Nancy was only the actress your unconscious hired to perform a pre-existing script – the Threshold Guardian forcing you to cross – and that she, feminist in 2005, is rewriting the script by integrating her Anima/Animus

in a balanced way – completing her own journey – then you'll begin to wake up and look for your Elixir. It's like architecture: you can't modify a structure if you don't first understand how it's built, with archetypes as foundations and the mythic pattern as matrix."

Hernando went back to the chaise longue, exhausted, as if he had just run a marathon.

"It sounds interesting, doctor. Mystical, even. It has that quality of grand theories: it explains too much, *too* perfectly. But I'm not convinced. If it were true, it would mean I never had control over anything. That I'm just a puppet of unconscious forces pulling my strings. And that my love for Nancy, which is the most real, the most genuine thing I've ever felt in my life, is nothing but a theatrical role I've been playing without knowing it, while she enjoys the power."

"We're all puppets until we become conscious," Yasmín replied. "That's the individuation process Jung described, and which Campbell narrated as the hero's journey toward wholeness – from the Ordinary World to the transformed Return. It's not about stopping the suffering, but understanding *why* we suffer in the way we do, and crossing the Threshold toward healing. And yes, your love for Nancy is real. I don't deny it. But the way you live it, the way you turn it into literature, into verses and a sorrow you yourself call beautiful or admirable, the way you constantly compare yourself to Larra and Bécquer… that's the archetype speaking through you, keeping you stuck in unresolved Trials. It's as if there were two Hernandos: one who genuinely loves and suffers, and another who watches that suffering and turns it into poetic material, who cultivates it, protects it because he knows he needs it in order to be the poet he wants to be – the hero who seeks the Elixir in pain. Nancy, citing Friedan, escapes that trap and controls her destiny, achieving an individuation you're still chasing – her universal narrative complete."

Hernando stared at the ceiling, tears running silently down his cheeks, leaving bright trails on his skin.

"You humiliate my pain, doctor. Maybe all of this *is* a play I wanted to stage for myself. A narrative I built to give my pain meaning. But if that's so… what's left of me? Who am I without

this pain? Just some architect drawing functional plans for buildings that will fall in fifty years? A poetry hobbyist writing mediocre verses in his spare time? A common man who will never be Bécquer or Larra? Someone who, as Shakespeare says, is fit only to eat and sleep?"

Yasmín smiled sadly, a smile she had perfected over years of practice, nourished by her own path through Campbell.

"That, Hernando, is the right question – the Call to Adventure you must now accept. And finding the answer will take the rest of your life, your own heroic cycle. But tell me: what do you prefer – to be Hernando Villanueva, architect who writes beautiful poems in his free hours and lives a full, balanced life… or a pale copy of Werther? Have you read the novel?"

"Werther?" Hernando raised his head, voice hoarse. "Goethe's. Of course I know it. The young man in the blue frock coat and yellow waistcoat who shoots himself in the temple for Charlotte. I read it at seventeen. It marked me."

"And what do you remember, exactly?"

"That he fell in love with a committed woman. That he idealised her to the point of madness. That he wrote feverish letters, burning up in his own fire. That in the end the pistol was his only answer."

"And Goethe, how did he feel afterward?"

Hernando swallowed.

"He was horrified. Years later he confessed he'd created a monster. Young men all over Germany were killing themselves in the same coat, with the same pistol, believing suicide was the culmination of sublime love. Goethe was ashamed. He said he had given shape to a contagious myth."

"And you, Hernando? Do you remember what you said the first time you walked into this office?"

"That I wanted to die…"

Hernando burst into tears and Yasmín offered him a box of tissues.

"Do you want to be another one of those boys imitating Werther?"

"No…" he whispered, his voice breaking. "Sometimes

yes. Sometimes I think that if I suffer enough, my verses will be worth something. That pain will make me immortal."

"Immortal like Werther? Or like Goethe, who lived, wrote *Faust*, travelled, loved again, and died old?"

Silence. Hernando clenched his fists.

"Goethe lived. Werther didn't. I… I don't know if I can live without this pain."

"Then ask yourself: do you want to be the hero who returns with the Elixir… or the one who stays dead inside the Belly of the Whale?"

Hernando looked at Jung's photo on the wall.

"I want to come back. But I don't know how."

"That is the beginning of the Return, Hernando. Originality doesn't lie in imitating the suffering of others, but in living your own life consciously, integrating the Anima instead of projecting it. Nancy, in 2005, already does that: she's in control, she quotes her authors, she enjoys not suffering, and her individuation shines – her monomyth completed with mastery."

"But Nancy only quotes those authors to justify her baseness."

"What baseness?"

"Preferring a job over love. Sleeping with a married man for a higher income."

"Allow me to stop you right there," said Yasmín, calm but firm, leaning forward slightly, her dark eyes fixed on his as if piercing the fog of his indignation – a mythical goddess of fertility and wisdom, the Archetypal Mother guiding the hero. "You call it 'baseness,' reduce her to a call girl who trades love for money or status, but isn't that exactly what you do with your accursed poets? You don't love Nancy; you love the archetypal transaction she offers you: the abandonment that justifies your tragic mask, the suffering you turn into immortal verse – your Supreme Ordeal for poetic Elixir. We're all driven by interests, Hernando. No one escapes that. If it isn't work, it's looks, money, status, emotional safety. Love – the pure feeling you idealise as a divine ray – isn't the initial motor; it's an add-on that appears over time, and only if it's mutual. Otherwise, it's fetishistic attachment: to the body, to

money, to fame, to the idea of being the suffering hero.

"Think of the twenty-something girls chasing celebrities: they don't love the man, they love the fetish of fame, the reflected sparkle. You do the same with Nancy: you fetishise her as the unattainable muse who validates your archetype. She chooses a job in Medellín, a man with more resources – yes, maybe married, maybe for 'greater income' – but isn't that as human as your own choice to suffer in order to emulate Larra? Nancy doesn't 'justify' anything with her authors; she quotes them because she's awakened to her own agency, integrating her animus – the Jungian male counterpart – to act, to decide, to refuse to be the passive Anima you project and later condemn when she escapes the script – she crosses her Threshold, faces her Trials, and returns with the Elixir of autonomy. In 2005, feminism isn't an excuse for 'baseness'; it's a tool to dismantle the patriarchal transaction in which the woman must be muse or martyr. She is the one in control now; she enjoys not being the one who suffers, because she has individuated: she recognises her interests – professional, economic, erotic – and owns them without guilt. You, on the other hand, fetishise pain for poetic immortality, inflating your ego with the Shadow of the Tragic Lover, stuck in the Belly of the Whale.

"Mutual love requires two individuated people, not one projecting the Anima while the other flees it. Nancy isn't a prostitute; she's human, interested, awake – a heroine in her own mythic matrix. You demonise her to keep your mask. Integrate that, Hernando, or you'll remain captive to the archetype, trading suffering for illusory greatness and never reaching the Return."

The session ended with the murmur of evening traffic in the street and the song of cicadas announcing nightfall. Hernando left the building with weak legs, as if he had just woken from a nightmare. He crossed into Parque de las Palmas and sat on a bench under the palms, watching the sky turn orange and purple over Bucaramanga. The humid heat wrapped him like a suffocating embrace.

He watched families strolling at dusk, children chasing pigeons, couples walking hand in hand speaking in low voices, old men feeding stray cats. Normal life. Ordinary life. Life without

tragedy – the Ordinary World to which the hero must return.

What if the doctor was right? What if everything had been an unconscious setup, a play written in the depths of his psyche even before meeting Nancy – his Call to Adventure rejected again and again? What if he had chosen Nancy precisely because her psychological profile – strong woman, independent, emotionally distant, feminist quoting Butler and hooks in 2005 – *guaranteed* that she would leave him one day, giving him the perfect material for his poems, while she reversed the power, integrated her Anima and enjoyed control – completing her monomyth successfully?

The idea filled him with horror and fascination in equal parts.

And yet, deep down, part of him admitted that Doctor Haddad was right. Yes, he had chosen Nancy because she fit too neatly into the script of tragic abandonment; yes, he had drunk vodka like Poe and sought the same faceless sexual abyss sung by the accursed poets in cheap motels, as if only by hitting bottom could he legitimise his verses. All that was true. But he also knew something that Yasmín, with all her Jungian wisdom, didn't quite grasp: that poetry doesn't just spring from hell; it can redeem it. Those same ghosts that had pushed him to the edge were capable of coming, one night, to sit beside him and, with their broken voices, show him the way back. Not to console him with sweet lies, but to remind him that they had fallen and, even in falling, left a lamp burning. If they could turn the night into verse, he could also turn verse into dawn.

But when he reached his apartment an hour later, when he opened the door and saw the empty sofa, when he felt the weight of silence and the echo of Nancy's laughter in every corner of those walls that had once vibrated with her presence, when he sensed her perfume still floating phantom-like in the air, he knew that, archetype or not, theatre or reality, the pain was his. Real. Unbearable. Genuine – the Belly of the Whale in its rawest form.

Would a new relationship heal him? But with whom? Another Threshold, another Trial?

That night, while drinking a glass of milk, he opened his notebook and wrote with a trembling hand:

If they say I invented you, that you're only
a shadow of a dream my mind contrived,
a phantom born from my own toiling hands,
a wound my pain itself has fabricated,
then why, if you're a fiction, does your scar
beat in my side with such relentless force?
Why does your gaze nest in my sleepless nights,
your missing weight curve tight around my core?
You, mistress of a modern cast of mind,
who counts love's rhythm, measures all its phases,
while I, turned tender, weeping and undone,
go on possessed by your still-living absence –
an anima that refuses to be severed,
a love that hurts because I feel you mine.

He wrote until dawn, unable to decide whether Doctor Yasmín Haddad had offered him a freeing revelation – the Mentor pointing toward the Elixir – or a refined cruelty: the possibility that even his most genuine suffering was, at bottom, a lie he had told himself, while Nancy moved forward in the present, empowered, individuated, and owner of her narrative – the heroine who had already returned transformed.

He walked aimlessly through Bucaramanga's streets, feeling the weight of the sun on his shoulders. Every corner reminded him of Nancy: the ice-cream parlour where they shared a dessert, the bookshop where she bought her feminist texts, the park where they kissed for the first time. The whole city had become a museum of his pain.

As he turned a corner he saw an ethereal figure beside him: Dante Alighieri, in his red hood, his aquiline profile walking at his side, contemplating the same streets with melancholy.

"I saw her only a few times in my life," the Florentine said in a grave voice. "Beatrice was nine when I met her. So was I. I saw her again nine years later, dressed in white, and my heart stopped. She married another. She died young. She never knew that I wrote for her the path from Hell to Paradise."

Hernando looked at him and the poet added, his dark eyes fixed on the horizon:

Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare
la donna mia, quand'ella altrui saluta,
ch'ogne lingua deven tremando muta,
e li occhi no l'ardiscon di guardare.
So gentle and so honest she appears
my lady, when she greets another there,
that every tongue falls silent, trembling, mute,
and eyes don't even dare to look at her.

Dante disappeared as they crossed the street, but on the next corner Petrarch appeared, in a scholar's robe and with ink-stained hands.

"Three hundred and sixty-six poems," said the Italian, showing him a yellowed manuscript. "Twenty-one years after her death I kept writing to her. Laura never loved me, Hernando. She never truly knew me."

The poet stopped under a tree and recited with closed eyes:

Benedetto sia 'l giorno, e 'l mese, e l'anno,
e la stagione, e 'l tempo, e l'ora, e 'l punto,
e 'l bel paese, e 'l loco ov'io fui giunto
da' duo begli occhi che legato m'ànno;

Blessed be the day, the month, the year,
the season, the time, the hour, the instant,
and the fair country, and the place where I
was struck and bound by those two lovely eyes.

Hernando kept walking. Petrarch faded into the crowd that stared at his outfit.

He reached his apartment at dusk. He turned on the light and the silence hit him like a slap. No Nancy music, no sound of her heels on the wooden floor, no crystalline laughter filling the

empty spaces.

He went to the kitchen and opened the fridge. There was still the Greek yogurt Nancy bought, the almond milk she liked so much, the fruit she cut for breakfast. Hernando slammed the door shut.

He poured himself another vodka and sat in front of his computer. But before he could open a blank document, Sylvia Plath appeared seated in the chair across from him. Her blond hair was dishevelled, her eyes shadowed, and she smoked a cigarette with trembling hands.

"Ted left me for another woman," she said hoarsely. "Assia Wevill. Younger, more exotic. He left me alone with two little children, in a brutal London winter."

Plath stood and walked toward the window, her silhouette outlined against the night:

I am pure acetylene,
attending my own cremation.

"Thus I felt, Hernando. As if I were burning alive and no one could see it."

Then she turned to him with a bitter smile:

Every woman adores a Fascist,
the boot in the face,
the brute heart.

"Does your Nancy adore one too? Is that why she despises you – because you're not cruel enough?"

The poetess went to the bathroom, leaving behind only the smell of gas and ashes.

Anne Sexton immediately emerged from the balcony and took a seat on the sofa with a glass of whisky in her hand. She wore a black dress and smoked with languid elegance.

"Sylvia and I were friends," she said softly. "We both wrote about death as if it were a lover. We both ended up killing ourselves. I in my garage, with the engine running, inhaling carbon

monoxide as if it were perfume."

She leaned toward Hernando and whispered:

I have been sold to you at nothing,
and you bought me cheap.

"That's love, isn't it? A transaction where we always lose."

Hernando drank more vodka as Anne faded into the darkness. He stood up, staggering, and went to his bedroom. He collapsed on the bed and stared at the ceiling, where the shadows danced like demons.

Alfonsina Storni was sitting at the edge of the mattress, barefoot, in the soaked white dress she wore the night of October 25, 1938, in Mar del Plata. Seawater still dripped from her black hair, forming a small puddle on the floor. Her enormous, sad eyes looked at him without reproach.

"I walked into the water," she said softly, almost in a wave's murmur. "No one stopped me. No one noticed. I went in slowly, like to a long-awaited meeting. The cold first hugged my legs, then my waist, then my chest. When it reached my neck, there was no turning back."

She leaned toward him and recited with the serenity with which she had given herself to the sea:

Voy a dormir, nodriza mía, acuéstame.
Ponme una lámpara a la cabecera;
una constelación, la que te guste;
todas son buenas; bájala un poquito.

"I'm going to sleep, my nurse; lay me down,"
"Put a small lamp beside my bed;"
"a constellation – whichever you prefer;"
"they're all good, just bring it a bit closer."

Then she added, almost maternally:

Hay una voz lejana que me llama

y otra más cerca que me dice: «¡Ven!»
Tú, que en la tierra fuiste buena y fuerte,
tú, que me diste el pecho y me acunaste,
arrúllame, arrúllame, que estoy cansada
de tanto andar y andar sin ser amada.

"There is a distant voice that calls my name,"
"and one much nearer whispering: 'Come, come.'"
"You who on earth were good to me and strong,"
"you who nursed me, rocked me as a child,"
"sing me to sleep; I'm tired, so tired of walking,"
"of walking on and on and never loved."

Alfonsina stood, leaving wet footprints on the wood. She moved to the window and gazed at the Bucaramanga night, as if searching for another sea.

"They say I killed myself for a man," she sighed. "It wasn't for one man. It was for all of them. For those I loved who didn't love me, for those I loved who betrayed me, for those I loved who left. It was the exhaustion of always being the one who stays, who writes, who suffers in silence while the others go on living."

She turned back to Hernando, her white dress clinging to her body, lips blue.

"Do you want to walk into the water too, Hernando? Do you want the Magdalena River to lull you the way the Atlantic cradled me?"

He didn't answer. He only stared at her, trembling.

Alfonsina smiled with infinite tenderness and sorrow.

"Don't do it," she whispered. "I did, and it didn't fix anything. Pain doesn't drown. It stays floating, waiting for someone else to pick it up."

She bent over and kissed his forehead with lips as cold as the October sea.

"Will you write down, Hernando, what I'm telling you from the dead?"

Before he could answer, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz was sitting on the bed. She wore her nun's habit, but her eyes shone

with fierce, worldly intelligence.

"No, my son," she said in old-fashioned Spanish. "Don't throw yourself into any river. I lived shut up in a convent, writing love verses I could never consummate. I loved in silence, in secret, knowing my desires were forbidden."

The nun took his hand gently:

Detente, sombra de mi bien esquivo,
imagen del hechizo que más quiero,
bella ilusión por quien alegre muero,
dulce ficción por quien penosa vivo.

"Stay, shadow of my elusive good,"
"image of the enchantment I most prize,"
"beautiful illusion for whose sake I gladly die,"
"sweet fiction for whose sake I sadly live."

"Your Nancy is your beautiful illusion, Hernando. Your sweet fiction. And for her you live in sorrow, unable to die, unable to live."

Sor Juana smiled sadly before fading away.

"But life in hardship is still life," her voice lingered. "Write, my son. Write and live."

He fell asleep with the bitter taste of vodka in his mouth and the dead poets' verses echoing in his head like a spectral choir.

The next day he woke with a brutal hangover. The sunlight coming through the window felt like an assault. He dragged himself to the bathroom and vomited what little he had eaten the day before.

He looked at himself in the mirror and saw a stranger: sunken eyes, several days' beard, pale skin.

"I'm turning into a corpse," he thought.

His phone rang. It was Ramiro, his boss at the architecture firm, asking about the women's prison project due at the end of the month. Hernando assured him everything was under control, though he hadn't touched the plans since Nancy left.

After breakfast – black coffee and two aspirins – he tried

to work. He opened the prison plans on his computer: a women's facility, high walls, narrow cells, corridors without natural light. The irony didn't escape him. Nancy had turned him into her prisoner, and now he was designing cages for other women.

The phone rang again. This time it was his mother.

"Son, how are you? I haven't heard from you in days."

"I'm fine, Mom," Hernando lied. "Everything's fine."

"And Nancy? How is she?"

He felt something break inside. He couldn't tell his mother the truth. Not yet.

"She's… she's travelling, Mom. For work."

"Ah, that's good. Send her my regards when you talk to her."

"Yes, Mom. I will."

He hung up and collapsed into his chair. Tears started rolling down his cheeks before he could stop them.

Emily Dickinson sat in the chair across from him, dressed in white as always, pale face and piercing eyes.

"I spent almost my entire life secluded in my house," the poet said softly. "I wrote seventeen hundred seventy-five poems. Most weren't published until after my death. I loved in secret, probably a married man, the Reverend Charles Wadsworth. He never knew."

She leaned toward Hernando and recited in a broken voice:

My life closed twice before its close;
It yet remains to see
If Immortality unveil
A third event to me,

So huge, so hopeless to conceive
As these that twice befell.
Parting is all we know of heaven,
And all we need of hell.

Emily reached out her hand.

"Your life has closed too, with Nancy's departure. Something in you has died. But something can also be reborn, if you allow it."

She kissed his cheek and left the smell of lavender and old paper behind.

That night, after drinking a litre of tequila, Hernando decided to walk. He left his apartment and wandered through Bucaramanga's streets, watching couples holding hands, families dining together in restaurants, young people laughing without worries.

He sat on a park bench. Federico García Lorca was beside him, dressed in a dark suit, black eyes shining intensely.

"Being shot at thirty-eight took me by surprise," said the Granadan poet. "I, who only wanted to write verses. During the Spanish Civil War. They killed me for my fame; that was my real crime. One side believed I was a red, the other that I was a bourgeois. But above all they killed me for loving freely those I met in my life, for loving life with a sincerity they called sin."

He leaned toward Hernando with a sad, bitter smile and a gypsy glint in his eyes:

Y que yo me la llevé al río,
creyendo que era mozuela,
pero tenía marido.

"And I took her down to the river, thinking she was a maiden, but she had a husband."

He straightened again, looked at the stars, and recited in a melodious voice:

Verde que te quiero verde.
Verde viento. Verdes ramas.
El barco sobre la mar
y el caballo en la montaña.

Green, how I want you green.
Green wind. Green branches.

The ship upon the sea,
the horse upon the mountain.

"I wrote about impossible love, Hernando. About desires that could never be fulfilled. My *Sonnets of Dark Love* were so scandalous that my family kept them hidden for decades."

The Spanish poet rose and laid a hand on Hernando's shoulder:

If you choose to be a poet,
prepare yourself to suffer.
To love without being loved in turn,
to give your being to the cruelest alchemy.
You will get beautiful verses from atrocious sorrows;
that will be your gift,
and also your immolation.

He walked away into the darkness, his silhouette fading among the trees.

Hernando kept walking. He passed the house of a college friend, tempted to ring the bell, but decided not to. He didn't want to explain, didn't want well-meaning advice.

He reached a bar he used to go to with Nancy. He went in and sat at the counter. He ordered a whisky and looked around. There were couples kissing in dark corners, groups of friends celebrating something, solitary men like himself drowning their sorrows in alcohol.

The bartender, a man in his fifties with a face weathered by life, served him the drink.

"You look bad, friend," he said. "Love troubles, right?"

Hernando nodded silently.

"Love is shit," the bartender went on. "It makes you feel like a god when it's good and like a worm when it's over. I've seen a lot of men sitting where you are, with the same defeated face."

"And what do you tell them?" Hernando asked.

"I tell them to drink in moderation and go home alive. The rest… the rest works itself out, or never does. But life goes on,

friend. It always goes on."

Hernando drank in silence. He paid and left. The cool night air cleared his head a little.

Rainer Maria Rilke was walking beside him now, reddish beard glinting under the streetlights, blue eyes shining. The Austrian poet wore a long coat and kept his hands in his pockets.

"Love isn't merging with the other," Rilke said in accented German. "It's protecting the other's solitude. Your Nancy has certainly protected hers. She has left you more alone and more authentic than you ever aspired to be."

They stopped under a lamppost and Rilke looked at him intensely:

Vielleicht sind alle Drachen
unseres Lebens Prinzessinnen,
die nur darauf warten, uns einmal
schön und mutig zu sehen.

Vielleicht ist alles Schreckliche
im Grunde das Hilflose,
das von uns Hilfe will.

"Perhaps all the dragons of our lives," he translated softly,
are princesses in disguise,
waiting for us to see them once
beautiful and brave.

"Perhaps all that seems terrible is, deep down, helplessness that wants our help."

"Is Nancy your dragon or your princess? Or both at once?" he asked, smiling sadly. "Listen well, Hernando: *Wer, wenn ich schriee, hörte mich denn aus der Engel Ordnungen?* – who, if I cried out, would hear me among the hierarchies of angels? No one. We are alone in our pain. But in that solitude we can create beauty. Suffering is the greatest experience."

Rilke disappeared, lifting his hat slightly as he turned the corner.

When he reached his apartment, Hernando sat at his desk. He didn't open a bottle. Instead he began to write a letter he would never send:

Dear Nancy,

I know you don't understand why your leaving has shattered me like this. For you it's simply a job opportunity, a new stage of your life. But for me, you are much more than that.

Tonight I walked with the ghosts of all the poets who died of love. Dante, Petrarch, Sylvia Plath, Lorca, Rilke. They all spoke to me, they all showed me their wounds.

And I understood something: I'm not going to die for you. I won't kill myself. I won't drink until I destroy myself. That would be giving you the final victory. That would be saying you were right, that I'm weak, that I can't live without you.

I'm going to live, Nancy. I'm going to live and I'm going to write. And every verse I write will be a monument to our love, but also a step toward my freedom.

I'm designing a prison for women now. The irony isn't lost on me. You made me your prisoner, and I design cages. But these cages have large windows that let in light. They have yards where the inmates can see the sky. They have libraries where they can read and dream of freedom.

Because I've learned that even in the narrowest prison, the spirit can be free.

One day, maybe many years from now, you'll read these verses and understand what you meant to me. Or maybe not. Maybe you'll go on with your life, happy and successful, without giving a thought to the poet you left behind.

It doesn't matter. I will write anyway.
With all my love,
Hernando

He folded the letter, put it in an envelope and slipped it into a drawer in his desk, with the other poems he had written for Nancy.

Then he opened the prison blueprints. He worked for hours, redesigning the spaces, adding light, creating areas where

the inmates could have moments of peace. They would not be cages, he decided. They would be places of redemption.

At three in the morning he finally went to bed. For the first time since Nancy had left, he managed to sleep without dreaming of her.

The next morning he woke with a mental clarity he hadn't felt in days. He showered, shaved, put on clean clothes. He made himself a full breakfast.

He went to the architecture firm and presented his plans. His bosses were impressed. The design was revolutionary: a prison that didn't look like a prison, a space that respected the inmates' dignity.

"This is exactly what we needed," Ricardo said. "You captured something the other architects couldn't: hope."

That evening, Hernando accepted a friend's invitation to dinner. They talked about politics, architecture, football. Hernando surprised himself laughing at a joke.

When he got back to his apartment, no ghost was waiting for him. The place was empty, but it no longer felt like a tomb.

He sat at his desk and wrote one final poem:

Today I did not cry for you. Today I worked,
today I ate, I laughed beside a friend,
today I lived without my chest wide open,
without the dagger driving in again.

It doesn't mean that I have now forgot you,
or that my love for you has finally died.
It only means I'm slowly learning how
to walk around with this love, wounded, inside.

For poets do not die of love; they live
on their knees long before their final breath,
yet turn their hurt into a little primer
that helps their readers bargain with their death.

He closed the notebook and turned out the light. He lay

down and once more nightmares came in which voices blamed him for having let his beloved slip away.

4. *Ariadne*

Beside her, the door opened with a soft click, and Ariadna entered, a slender and attractive woman who looked to be around forty, though her vitality and elegance made her appear younger. She carried two steaming cups of coffee in her hands, dressed in a professional yet alluring outfit: a white silk blouse that accentuated her décolletage, a black pencil skirt that highlighted her long, toned legs, and heels that clicked confidently on the wooden floor.

Hernando took a cup while giving her a tired smile, a gesture that revealed his vulnerability.

"Thank you," he murmured, his voice hoarse with exhaustion.

Ariadna sat down at an adjacent desk, crossing her legs with natural elegance, and she watched how the light played on Hernando's face. An avid reader of Susan Sontag, she had learned to distrust aesthetic ideals that confuse health with purity and muscle with moral virtue. In him, she sensed the opposite of that authoritarian aesthetic of the perfect body: a humanity not domesticated by the mirror, a silent beauty, without propaganda, that invited not admiration, but understanding.

Ever since Hernando had started working at the firm two years ago, she had noticed it: a young man of barely thirty, with a brilliant mind for architectural design and an ordinary body, which escaped the muscles forged in the gym at the cost of hours of study, with a deep gaze that revealed an uncommon sensitivity.

Ariadna thought that his appeal lay not in his form, but in the serene stillness of someone who knows himself and doesn't need to show off; a presence that defied the clichés of contemporary desire.

"By the way, Hernando," Ariadna said after a sip of coffee, "how did it go with the psychologist? With Yasmín, the Jungian I recommended to you."

Hernando looked up from the plans, surprised by the question.

"Ah, yes. Very good, actually. She has a different method.

Interesting."

"Different in what way?" Ariadna leaned slightly forward, genuinely curious.

"Well, she doesn't try to make me deny my impulses, nor does she try to mythologize them. Rather, she helps me fulfill certain archetypes, to understand them, to live them consciously instead of repressing them. It's as if..." he paused, searching for the words, "instead of fighting against what one is, one learns to be it completely, without self-destructing, taking control."

Ariadna nodded slowly, her green eyes sparkling with interest.

"How fascinating. It sounds very... liberating."

"It is," Hernando admitted. "I really appreciate the recommendation, Ariadna. You've helped me a lot. If there's anything I can do for you, any favor at all... I'm at your service!"

Ariadna smiled, a gesture that contained more than mere professional courtesy. She placed her cup on the desk with deliberate care.

"Are you really offering me a favor?"

"Whatever you need."

"Well..." Ariadna parted her lips slightly, "it's curious that you mention Yasmín and her method of fulfilling archetypes instead of denying them. I've never gone to see her personally. My mental health is excellent, thank God."

"We all have excellent mental health until we see a psychologist, just as we all have excellent physical health until we see a doctor."

"That's what I heard, excuse me..."

"You don't have to do that. You just expressed the biggest mental-health problem in Colombia. In this country, most people have so little regard for mental health; that's why there are so many mentally ill people murdering others."

"Very true," Ariadna observed contritely. "They say that Jorge Eliécer Gaitán was talking about the need to diagnose the mental health of Colombians, when Roa, one of those listening to him, stepped forward and shot him dead."

"I hadn't heard it, but it's beautiful. Undoubtedly a message that death allowed, tired as it was of taking so many Colombians so prematurely."

"Can I be frank with you?"

"Of course."

"Lately I've been thinking about what you said, about not denying who you are."

Hernando observed her with renewed attention.

"What are you talking about?"

"There are things I've always been afraid to do, Hernando. Things I constantly suppress." She paused, playing with a strand of her brown hair. "Have you ever felt that your entire life is designed to keep up appearances? That every decision you make is to please others?"

"I guess we all feel that at some point."

"No, you don't understand." Ariadna's voice took on a restrained urgency. "You offered to return the favor. Fine. I want you to buy me coffee. But not here, not some fancy place in Sotomayor. I want to go to a forbidden neighborhood, one of those places where people like me never set foot."

Hernando blinked, bewildered.

"A forbidden neighborhood?"

"Yes. I want to do something that terrifies me, something that goes against everything I'm supposed to be." Ariadna stood up, approaching him. "Will you take me?"

Hernando felt a shiver run down his spine. There was something dangerous and exciting about the proposal, something that resonated with his own inner turmoil.

"Okay," he finally said. "I know a place."

That afternoon, Hernando drove her in his lilac 2005 Renault sedan through the streets of Bucaramanga until they reached Carrera 17 and Quebrada Seca, a working-class neighborhood where beer stores lined the sidewalk in narrow shops with plastic chairs. Ariadna watched from the window with a mixture of fascination and nervousness, her perfectly manicured hands clutching her designer handbag.

"Here?" she asked when Hernando parked in front of a store with the sign "Donde Chepe - Cervezas y Sancocho," while saying to herself: "I'm not here for the beer or the adventure, but to avoid suffocating, to feel that I still exist outside the role of wife and

mother."

"You said you wanted a forbidden neighborhood," Hernando replied with an ironic smile. "Welcome to real life."

They entered the establishment, a cramped space with Formica tables and walls decorated with faded posters of soccer teams and models in swimsuits advertising beer. The owner, a burly man in a stained white T-shirt, looked at them with obvious curiosity. A couple of construction workers in work clothes stopped their conversation to watch the elegant woman who had just entered.

Ariadna sat down carefully in a plastic chair, as if afraid it would break under her weight. Hernando ordered a Kola Hipinto for himself and asked Ariadna what she wanted to drink.

"What kind of beer do they have?" she asked, looking around with curious eyes.

"All national brands," replied the owner in a hoarse voice.

"The cheapest one, please."

The owner brought Hernando bottled Kola Hipinto and Ariadna a large glass of ice-cold beer, thick and bubbly, with crushed ice floating on the surface.

"I'm not sure how I'm supposed to feel," Ariadna admitted, cautiously tasting her beer. "Liberated? Terrified? Ridiculous?"

"Maybe all three," Hernando suggested, sipping his Kola Hipinto. "Why did you really want to come here?"

Ariadna took a long swig of beer, wincing at the bitter texture. She leaned back in her chair and exhaled deeply, as if bracing herself for something.

"Because my whole life has been a carefully constructed lie," she finally said. "And I needed to tell someone. Someone who won't judge me like Emeterio, my husband, did."

"I see that I have been chosen."

Ariadna toyed with the glass in her hands, watching the condensation drops slide down the glass.

"I was born in Bogotá, into an upper-middle-class family from the north. My father was a civil engineer, one of those strict men who believe the world works like a mathematical equation. My mother..." she sighed, "was the perfect example of the self-sacrificing wife, the one who sacrifices everything to keep up

appearances. She never worked, never complained, never questioned anything."

"And you?" Hernando asked.

"I was raised to be exactly like her." Ariadna took another sip. "From childhood, I was taught that my worth depended on my obedience, my decorum, my ability to make others feel comfortable. 'Good girls behave,' 'Decent young ladies don't raise their voices,' 'Your role is to support your future husband.' All of that."

"But you studied business administration at Los Andes," Hernando reminded her. "That doesn't sound very traditional."

Ariadna smiled bitterly.

"Oh, they let me study. But do you know why? Because my father said that 'an educated woman is the best marriage investment.' It wasn't so I could have a career, Hernando, but so I could hold interesting conversations at business dinners. So I could be a trophy wife with brains."

The workers at the next table had returned to their conversation, but one of them occasionally cast leering glances at Ariadna. She didn't seem to notice, or perhaps she did and didn't care.

"And that's where you met Emeterio?" Hernando asked.

"Not exactly." Ariadna paused to take a drink. "I met him later, at an entrepreneurs' event. I was twenty-four. He was thirty-nine. A successful businessman, with a booming fruit exporting company. Serious, responsible, with money accumulated through money laundering."

"Money laundering?"

"Don't tell me you're unaware of the alliance between drug traffickers and entrepreneurs in the construction business, Hernando."

"I've heard about it often," Hernando agreed, "but I never believed it to be true."

"Drug traffickers launder their money through sports clubs, art galleries, and, of course, construction. This is because construction is a huge cash eater: you buy a lot, inflate invoices, pay contractors under the table, and suddenly you have a building worth ten times

your investment. Nobody asks where the money came from if the crane is standing and the concrete smells new. But it's not just that, Hernando. It's impunity disguised as progress. A thirty-nine-year-old man, in an expensive suit and with an entrepreneurial smile, can arrive at an event like that, with his banana exporting company that's 'going strong,' and nobody—not you, not me, not the banks—dares to look beneath the surface. Because if you do, you realize that the wind driving him isn't the market: it's the hot breath of the labs in Cauca, the boatmen on the Pacific coast, the dead that no one counts. And the worst part is: when the system starts to smell the rot, they don't run away. They change their name. From Ventanón to Ventanal, for example, and then they boast about having used that name for 40 years. In Emeterio's case, from fruit exporter to 'international goods importer.' From drug trafficker to philanthropist who donates the neighborhood sports field. And people, like you, nod and say: 'I've heard about it often, but I never believed it was true.' A man like that, illegal, but legalized by a corrupt state, is, like most politicians, the perfect candidate according to my parents."

"And according to you?"

"In my opinion..." Ariadna let out a humorless laugh, "I saw him as fragile, emotionally distant."

"This woman isn't looking for a lover," Hernando thought, wondering why she had chosen him; "she's looking for a change, and she fears my fragility less than her loneliness. I'm playing with fire, but what heartbroken man wouldn't play with fire for a night with a beautiful woman?"

"But you don't share those impressions with someone who's been nice to you. My parents were thrilled with their possessions: a country house with a pool, an apartment in Bogotá, another in Miami, and two cars. My mother would tell me, 'Ariadna, love comes with time. What's important is stability.' My father would say, 'That man will give you the life you deserve.' And I... I believed them, sincerely, and I was too weak to say no."

Hernando watched as Ariadna gripped the glass tighter, her knuckles turning white.

"The wedding was a spectacle," she continued. "Three hundred

guests, a live orchestra, a dress imported from Italy. Everyone said I was the most beautiful bride they'd ever seen. But I felt like an actress in a play I hadn't chosen to star in. You have no idea how many people live to please others."

"And the honeymoon?"

Ariadna visibly shuddered.

"The Bahamas. A five-day cruise and thousands of dollars in shopping. Emeterio spent three of those days locked in his room with his laptop, closing a deal. The first night..." she paused, took another swig of beer, "the first night I realized we had made a terrible mistake. Or at least I had."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. That was the problem." Ariadna looked him straight in the eye. "Emeterio treated me like I was just another transaction in his business. Efficient, quick, no real connection. He finished, turned over, and fell asleep. I lay awake all night, staring at the ceiling, wondering if this would be the next fifty years of my life."

Hernando ordered another juice for Ariadna, this time lulo, and another Kola Hipinto for himself.

"And then your daughters were born?" he finally asked.

Ariadna's face softened for the first time since they had entered the bar.

"Yes. Camila was born the following year. She's twelve now. She's... like I was, or like I wanted to be: rebellious, questioning, with that fire I let them extinguish." She smiled tenderly. "Sometimes she terrifies me, and other times she gives me hope. At least she won't make my mistakes."

"And the youngest?"

"Sofía is eleven. She's completely different. Sweet, dreamy, she believes in happy endings. She reads fairy tales and asks me if her dad and I fell in love like in the movies." Ariadna felt a lump in her throat. "I don't have the heart to tell her the truth."

"What is truth?"

"That her father and I never truly loved each other. That we married for convenience. That we stay together out of inertia and for her and her sister." She drank more beer, her movements becoming less careful. "Emeterio travels constantly. Weeks out of

the country. When he's home, we go days without having a real conversation. We sleep in the same bed, but we could be on different continents."

"Why don't you get a divorce?" Hernando asked, even though he already knew the answer.

"For the girls. Emeterio and I have a tacit agreement: when Sofía turns eighteen, we'll separate. We've already discussed it. He's not happy either, Hernando. It's just that his unhappiness manifests itself differently. He takes refuge in work, in numbers, in business. I—" Her voice broke slightly—"once I discovered gay pornography on his computer. Since then, I've taken refuge in fantasies."

Hernando felt that they were getting to the heart of the confession.

"What kind of fantasies?"

Ariadna looked at him with an intensity that made him feel naked.

"Fantasies about what my life would be like if I had been a pornographic actress."

Hernando opened his eyes, unable to hide his surprise.

"Luis Buñuel's film *Belle de Jour*?"

"No."

"It's the story of a society lady who, from one day to the next, decides to secretly work as a prostitute. She doesn't do it for money, but out of a desire for men to value her purely for her beauty, just as her husband has, in fact, done."

"If you recommend it, I'll watch it with you."

Hernando smiled without nodding, afraid to ask her where they would see it.

"If I'd had the courage to choose differently," Ariadna continued. "If I'd said no to my parents. If I'd sought passion instead of stability. If I'd..." She paused, biting her lip, "...met someone like you before."

The air between them thickened. Hernando felt his pulse quicken.

"Ariadna..."

"Let me finish," she interrupted. "I need to say this. It's been

years since I've felt seen, Hernando. Emeterio looks at me and sees the mother of his daughters, the manager of his house, the decorative companion at social events. But he doesn't see me. He doesn't see the woman I was, or the woman I could have been."

"And who were you? Who could you have been?"

Ariadna laughed, a sound both bitter and beautiful.

"I was the top student in my graduating class at Los Andes University. I had job offers from three multinational corporations. I wanted to travel, see the world, build something on my own." She paused. "And I was also a woman with desires, Hernando. With passions. With needs that went beyond being an exemplary wife and mother."

"What happened to that woman?"

"I buried her. Because that's how it had to be. Because when Emeterio proposed to me and my parents pressured me to accept, I understood that I had to choose: to be the woman I wanted to become or to be the woman I was expected to be. I chose wrong."

The bar owner approached with more drinks without anyone ordering them. Ariadna had already lost count of how many beers they'd had.

"There was a moment," Ariadna continued, her tongue slightly slurred with emotion, "a few months after I got married, when I almost ran away. Literally. I had saved some money, and I had the number of a friend in Buenos Aires who had offered me her sofa. One night, with Emeterio asleep, I packed a suitcase."

"What happened?"

"I saw myself in the mirror," Ariadna said, closing her eyes, "with that suitcase, at three in the morning, and I asked myself, 'Where are you going? What will you tell your family? How will you make a living? What will people think?' And fear won. I unpacked the suitcase, went back to bed, and never tried to leave again."

"But here you are," Hernando pointed out. "In this bar. Doing something that scares you, something rebellious."

Ariadna opened her eyes, glistening with tears she had held back.

"Being brave twenty years later is too late." She laughed at herself. "You know what's most pathetic, Hernando? I work in

Ramiro's office just to have an excuse to leave the house. I don't need the money. Emeterio earns enough for me to spend the rest of my life as a high-class housewife. But I couldn't stand staying in that house, waiting for him to come back from his trips, pretending we were a happy family."

"It's not pathetic," Hernando said gently. "It's a way of life. As my father used to say, if you want to be unhappy, compare yourself to those you think live better than you; if you want to be happy, compare yourself to those who live worse. Think of those housewives who wither away in tiny apartments, childless, with a wall outside their window."

"Perhaps." Ariadna drank more. "But there's something else I haven't told you. Something that defines who I really am."

"Tell me."

Ariadna lowered her voice, although nobody in that bar knew them or paid them any real attention.

"Emeterio used to call me a nymphomaniac. He said it as an insult, as if there were something sick about me. Because I wanted more than he was willing to give. More intimacy, more passion, more... connection. For him, sex was just another item on his to-do list. Something to do on Tuesdays and Fridays, efficiently, without going overboard."

"It sounds problematic."

"He was. He is." Ariadna gritted her teeth. "For years he made me feel like there was something wrong with me. That my desires were excessive, inappropriate, shameful. My mother had taught me that 'decent ladies don't enjoy those things,' that it was 'a marital duty.' So when I discovered that I did enjoy it, that I wanted more, Emeterio made me feel like a deviant."

"There's nothing wrong with you," Hernando said firmly.

"Now I know. Or I'm starting to know." Ariadna looked at him with disarming vulnerability. "Do you know when I really started noticing you, Hernando? Not when you arrived at the office two years ago. It was later, when we started talking during lunch."

"What changed?"

"You used to talk about books, poetry, ideas. You quoted Neruda, Bécquer, all those poets I had secretly read as a teenager,

before I was convinced I should focus on 'practical' things." She smiled sadly. "Emeterio hasn't read a book in twenty years that isn't about finance or business. But you had a passion for words, for beauty, for the meaning of things."

"I'm not that special, Ariadna."

"For me, you are." She leaned forward. "You represent everything I sacrificed. Youth, passion, emotional depth. When I see you drawing those plans with such dedication, when I hear you speak of architecture as if it were constructed poetry, when I see your pain for Nancy..." She paused. "I see the man I could have loved if I'd had the courage to wait."

Hernando felt the weight of that confession.

"Ariadna, I'm broken. I'm not a lifeline."

"I know." She laughed softly. "We're both shipwrecked, aren't we? Me with my dead marriage, you with your broken heart. I don't expect you to save me, Hernando. I just want... to feel. Even if it's just for a moment. To feel that I'm still alive, that I'm not just a mother, a wife, another piece of furniture in that huge, empty house."

The bar had become more crowded. Workers just finished their shifts, street vendors, taxi drivers. No one paid them any real attention, but Ariadna felt every glance as a liberation. She was doing something forbidden, something that "Ariadna from Bogotá, Emeterio's wife" would never do.

"Do you know what's the saddest thing?" she continued. "My daughters don't even know their real mother. They know the edited version, the one who packs nutritious lunches, checks homework, and attends parent-teacher meetings. But they don't know the woman who wanted to be a writer; who dreamed of traveling to Paris and living in a bohemian attic, like Anaïs Nin; who once painted nudes in art class until their father found out and forced her to stop."

"You can still do those things," Hernando suggested.

"Can I?" Ariadna shook her head. "I'm forty years old, Hernando. Forty years of conventions, commitments, responsibilities. I can't just go to Paris. I have two daughters who need me, if only as a symbol of stability. I have a husband who,

although he doesn't love me, depends on me to maintain the social facade. I have elderly parents who would die of shame if I divorced him."

"So, what do you want?"

Ariadna looked at him with a mixture of desire and desperation.

"I want stolen moments. I want to feel that I can still make a man desire me not for my stability or my last name or my bank account, but for who I am. I want to recover even a fragment of the woman I could have been."

"And then?"

"Then I'll go back home, to my life, to my role." Ariadna shrugged. "But at least I'll have had this. This café is forbidden territory, this conversation, this confession."

Hernando felt a mixture of compassion and desire.

"Your life is happy and stable, why do you desire a change that, while it will satisfy your curiosity, may lead you to ignominy and disgrace?"

Ariadna glanced at him sideways, as if she were already expecting that question.

"Now you speak like the angel Gabriel."

"Me?"

"Don't you realize that my desire to know life in all its complexity is the same as Eve's desire when she bit the apple from the tree of knowledge?"

Hernando blushed with embarrassment. He hadn't expected such a complex response from a woman he was already dismissing as a mere pleasure-seeking housewife. The comparison to Eve, and to humanity in general, was overwhelmingly accurate. He wondered if he wasn't the abnormal one in this conversation, a man incapable of breaking free from the molds society imposed on him in vain, because sooner or later, one way or another, the rebellious beast that each of us harbored emerged—the beast of original sin, the one that rebelled against the most pleasurable order, until hypocrisy and double standards became our way of life. At least Ariadna was sincere, displaying her audacity like Lucifer before angels and demons alike.

He reconsidered his position and concluded that Ariadna was

more than a married woman seeking an adventure; her trapped soul was looking for a knight to abduct her from her castle tower and reveal to her the joys or the hells of freedom.

"Is there more?" he asked gently. "More that you need to tell me?"

Ariadna took a deep breath.

"There were others, Hernando. Not many, but a few. A professor at the university, before I met Emeterio. He taught me more about life in three months than my parents did in twenty years. Then, a colleague at my first job, before I got married. They were... brief, intense encounters. They made me feel desired, powerful."

"And after you got married?"

Ariadna hesitated, but the need for honesty won out.

"A couple of times. Once with an architect who visited the office five years ago. Another time with a neighbor with ill intentions I'd rather forget. They meant nothing emotionally. They were just attempts to fill the void Emeterio left. But with you..." She looked at him intently. "With you it's different. It's not just physical desire. It's connection."

Hernando remained silent, processing everything he had heard.

"I know what you're thinking," Ariadna said. "That I'm a married woman playing with fire. That I'm going to hurt you like Nancy hurt you. That this can't end well."

"Something like that."

"You're right." Ariadna nodded. "But do you know what I've learned in these forty years, Hernando? That nothing ends well. That everything is temporary. That happiness is made up of moments, not permanent states. And I prefer to have these moments with you, even if they're borrowed, than to continue living in the comfortable lie of my perfect marriage."

The bar owner approached with the bill. Hernando paid, and they both went out into the street, where the sunset painted the sky in shades of orange and purple.

"Thank you," Ariadna said, slightly dizzy from the number of beers she had drunk. "Thank you for bringing me here. For listening to me. For not judging me."

"No one has the right to judge, Ariadna. We all carry our own burdens."

She approached and kissed him gently on the lips, a kiss that tasted of soursop, despair, and dangerous promises.

"This changes everything, doesn't it?" she whispered.

"Yes," Hernando admitted. "It changes everything."

As he drove her back, Ariadna was silent beside him, looking out the window. Hernando thought of Helen of Troy, of Anna Karenina, of Francesca da Rimini, all those tragic lovers from literature whose illicit passions ended in foretold tragedy. But he also thought of Ariadna's words: "I prefer borrowed moments..."

And perhaps, just perhaps, that was enough. At least for now.

In the days that followed, the dynamic in the office changed in subtle but unmistakable ways. Ariadna began arriving each morning with two cups of coffee, one for her and one for him, a small ritual that to outsiders looked innocent but that both of them knew was charged with meaning. Their conversations grew longer, more intimate, laced with double meanings that only they understood.

One afternoon, while Hernando was reviewing some plans, Ariadna sat across from him, crossing her legs with the deliberate grace he had come to recognize.

"It's very quiet today," she said softly.

"Normal for a Friday," he answered without looking up.

"You're a young man, Hernando. Barely thirty. Nancy left more than a month ago..."

"Has it been that long?" He sighed and put down his pencil.

"She's no longer your wife," Ariadna insisted, leaning forward so that her floral perfume filled the space between them.

"I know. But she keeps writing that she loves me, giving me hope."

"You're just her spare tire."

"What I believe myself to be refuses to accept it."

Ariadna, seasoned by her own unhappy marriage, recognized the internal conflict immediately.

"What made you look for a job in Medellín?" she asked, probing the wound.

"I don't know."

"Think about it," she encouraged, her voice conspiratorial.

"How can I know? I'm not rich, I'm not famous, I'm not a role model."

Ariadna smiled inwardly. That very ordinariness was part of what attracted her.

"Other women find you very interesting. Very manly," she said, her tone rich with suggestion.

Hernando looked up and met her gaze. Her green eyes shone with defiance. She stood, kissed his cheek, lingering a second longer than courtesy required, and left.

That afternoon, alone in his apartment, Hernando weighed the pros and cons of an affair with a married woman. Pros: the thrill of secrecy, forbidden passion to fill the void Nancy had left. Cons: emotional devastation, guilt, the inevitable painful ending.

He poured himself a glass of passion-fruit juice, its sweet-sour taste mirroring his situation, and turned on the television. Silent sepia images of voluptuous models from a KOM beer commercial stared back at him like ghosts of repressed desires.

The next day he greeted Ariadna with a kiss on the cheek. She received it with a smile and a subtle moistening of her lips, a promise.

"Who?" he asked, picking up the thread from the day before.

"Who what?" she replied, feigning innocence, enjoying the game.

"Which women find me manly?"

With a calculated movement she uncovered her thigh, revealing soft skin that begged to be touched.

"I do, for example."

"I didn't know," he said, taking her by the waist, drawn by her confidence.

"My mother always said that all relationships fail in bed," she murmured. "Do you agree?"

"Perhaps." His eyes slid over her plunging neckline; his pulse quickened.

He leaned in to kiss her. She dodged playfully, prolonging the tension.

"Before anything happens, I have to warn you: my husband is a violent man. The architect I told you about... I never heard from him again. I don't know if he left me or if Emeterio had him killed out of jealousy."

"That's just suspicion," Hernando snapped. "Nobody kills over infidelity anymore."

"There are very violent people in this country."

"I'll be careful," he said, already possessed by desire.

"And I want to know about your private life..."

He smiled flirtatiously and opened up.

"Nancy often complained about our sex life."

"Ah! You didn't like it?"

"How can I put it?" He grinned lasciviously. "I liked it too much."

"Yes..." Ariadna's eyes sparkled, recognizing a kindred spirit. "That's the main cause of divorce: sexual incompatibility."

The confession in the bar had torn down every wall. They had stripped themselves emotionally before doing so physically.

His gaze drifted to the window where a small bird pecked at the breadcrumbs Ariadna left every morning, a tender gesture that contrasted sharply with her boldness.

"Maybe my fate is the same," he said. "To marry for convenience someone I don't love."

"I don't think so," she replied, running a sensual hand through her hair. "You're talented, Hernando. Don't rush. What you need is another woman."

Her attraction was layered: physical (his young, strong body), intellectual (his love of literature), emotional (his vulnerability made her feel powerful and desired). In him she saw the chance to relive her youth, to escape the routine of dissatisfied wife and mother.

"Are you free tomorrow afternoon?"

His face hardened.

"No. I have university."

"Yes," she said, annoyed. "I remember. The music-appreciation course."

"I should follow your example. Emeterio flew to the United

States yesterday, two weeks away. Didn't I tell you?"

He watched her intently. Anna Karenina had fallen passionately for the young officer Vronsky; their affair became scandal, isolation, guilt, suicide beneath a train. Was that what Ariadna was offering, self-destruction disguised as consolation?

"I don't recall."

At that moment Ramiro burst in unexpectedly, middle-aged, balding, gray beard, slight hunch from years bent over drafting tables, face etched with chronic stress.

"How's the project coming, Hernando?"

"Ready in two weeks."

"Too late. I suggest you stay late tonight and move it forward."

Hernando nodded. Ramiro turned to leave, then stopped.

"I need it in ten days."

"I'll do what I can."

Ramiro stared at him for a moment, assessing.

"Overtime if necessary."

As the door closed, Ariadna intervened loyally.

"He won't let us down, will he?"

Hernando nodded resignedly. She looked at him with complicity, eyes promising far more than mere work.

"We'll work together."

A shiver ran down his spine. He knew exactly what "working nights" meant while Emeterio was on the other side of the world. He thought of Francesca da Rimini, married for political reasons, who fell in love with her brother-in-law Paolo while reading the story of Lancelot and Guinevere; both murdered by the jealous husband and condemned to whirl forever in the storm of the lustful in Dante's Hell.

Books and their authors were our pimp, Francesca says in the *Inferno. And what will be ours, the plans and the overtime?*

That night the office became another world. The city lights poured through the large windows, casting long shadows over the drafting tables. Ariadna arrived wearing skinny jeans and a cotton blouse that left her shoulders bare, hair loose in natural waves.

"Where do we start?" she asked, approaching the table where the plans lay spread.

"North façade," he answered, hyper-aware of her proximity, of a new, more intimate perfume.

They worked in silence for almost an hour, bodies gradually getting closer, hands brushing "accidentally," sexual tension rising like a storm.

"Thirsty?" she asked finally. "I brought something."

From her bag she took out a bottle of red wine, two plastic cups, cheese, crackers.

"This isn't office food," he smiled.

"It's accomplice food."

He looked at the wine and shook his head gently.

"I haven't drunk alcohol in weeks, Ariadna. Part of... trying to put myself back together."

She looked at him with surprise and admiration.

"True. That's... admirable."

"Anything else in the bag?"

She produced a carton of loquat juice bought that morning, as if she had guessed.

"Loquat. Hope you like it."

He accepted with a grateful smile. She poured wine for herself, loquat juice for him.

"To accomplices," she said.

The cups clinked; their eyes locked over the rims. The wine was expensive, the kind Emeterio bought to impress clients. The loquat juice was sweet and astringent, pure regional flavor.

"Do you regret coming?"

"No," he answered honestly. "You?"

"Not at all." She perched on the edge of the table, legs crossed. "In fact I feel more alive than in years. Is it so terrible to admit it?"

"No. It's honest."

She sipped her wine.

"When we were in that 'forbidden' bar," she said, making quotation marks with her fingers, "I thought: this is the woman I could have been. The one who walks into working-class bars, speaks her mind, isn't afraid to admit desire."

"You can still be her."

"Can I?" She shook her head. "Not completely. Not with

Camila and Sofía. Not with my parents who depend on the image of their perfect daughter. But here, with you, for a few hours... I can pretend."

"You're not pretending," he said, stepping closer. "You're being real."

She set her cup down and looked at him, desire and melancholy mixed.

"You know what attracts me most? That you understand pain."

"Too well."

"That's why this works. We're not looking for eternal love or happy endings. Just... respite. A moment of real connection before returning to our fractured lives."

He took her waist and pulled her close.

"Is that what we are? Respite?"

"Yes," she whispered. "And there's nothing wrong with that. Sometimes respite is all we need to keep going."

They kissed, slow and deep, tasting of wine and loquat, of despair and unsaid things. Her hands found his hair; his traced the curve of her back.

"This will complicate everything," he murmured against her lips.

"It's already complicated," she answered, unbuttoning her blouse. "What does it matter?"

They ended up on the floor, atop blankets she had brought "for the cold," bodies intertwined while the lights of Bucaramanga witnessed their transgression.

That night, drenched in sweat, Hernando lay between Ariadna's open legs, clutching her feet with trembling hands. She moaned sharply, arching in ecstasy, releasing years of pent-up frustration. Her life of repression drove her to this transgression. In Hernando, she found not only physical pleasure but validation: he desired her with an intensity Emeterio had never shown.

"Keep going!" she exclaimed. "Keep going! I'm a whore! Yes! I love cheating on my husband! Yes!"

The words spilled from her mouth uncontrollably, freed from decades of measured phrases, proper conversation, and the upbringing of a well-bred young lady. In that moment, Ariadna felt

simply raw, hungry, alive, alienated from Emeterio's wife, Camila and Sofía's mother; the nemesis of the obedient daughter her parents had cultivated.

"I didn't think Ariadna was capable of such depravity..." Hernando thought, wondering if Nancy had done the same with her lover at the congress, "but there is no adultery without sin. Enjoy it, accomplice of her liberation or her destruction!"

Hernando quickened his movements until he burst into a groan of pleasure. Then he separated from Ariadna and collapsed onto the makeshift bed, a mattress of blankets on the floor.

"I couldn't ejaculate," he admitted, panting.

Ariadna hugged him, her hot skin against his, her breasts pressed against his side.

"So much the better..." she replied. "Tantric sex."

Hernando remained silent, staring at the office ceiling, which now smelled of sweat, perfume, and transgression. Today he was a character from a D.H. Lawrence novel, the English writer born in 1885 who scandalized the world with *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), a novel about Constance Chatterley's adultery with her gamekeeper, exploring carnal passion as a liberation from social puritanism. Lawrence, persecuted by censorship—his book was banned in several countries and publicly burned—died of tuberculosis in 1930 at the age of forty-four, exiled in France, ruined by poverty and rejection. "Where is the liberation in all this?" Hernando wondered, feeling Ariadna's weight on his chest, "or is it just another form of slavery?"

Ariadna had already been foreshadowed in Emma Bovary by Gustave Flaubert in his acclaimed novel *Madame Bovary* (1857), the biography of a woman married to a mediocre doctor, who seeks passion in affairs that lead her to debt, lies, and suicide by arsenic poisoning. Emma, inspired by real women like Delphine Delamare, represented female dissatisfaction within the French bourgeoisie. "Emma died searching for something that didn't exist," Hernando thought, "and here I am, repeating the same mistake, looking for Nancy in the arms of another married woman."

Ariadna, oblivious to his inner torment—herself grappling with

her own guilt, thinking of her daughters asleep at home, cared for by the maid who believed her employer was in a business meeting—caressed his breast with experienced fingers.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked sleepily.

"Nothing," Hernando lied.

But he thought of Nancy driving toward Medellín with her cat in the passenger seat, oblivious to the chaos she had left behind. He thought of the Venezuelan prostitute bleeding out in his arms while he screamed a name that wasn't hers. He thought of all the damned poets he had invoked in his grief, as if they were saints of a religion of heartbreak. He thought of his cousin Joel and his warning about unconditional love. He thought of the verses he had written in his notebook, "Poems to Nancy," which now seemed pathetic and melodramatic, but which captured his essence: a man lost in the labyrinth of unrequited love.

"What am I doing?" he wondered as Ariadna snuggled up to him. "Am I getting revenge on Nancy? Or am I just trying to feel something, anything, to fill this void?"

Ariadna, for her part, imagined Camila waking up in the middle of the night, discovering her mother wasn't home, and calling her on the cell phone Ariadna had deliberately left on silent. She imagined her sweet Sofía asking her the next day where she had been, already inventing another lie, adding another layer to the web of deceit that sustained her life.

"Hernando," she finally murmured.

"Yes?"

"Have you ever wondered if we deserve to be happy?"

Hernando turned his head to look at her. In the dim light coming through the window, Ariadna seemed vulnerable, almost fragile, very different from the self-assured woman who worked in the office.

"I don't know if anyone deserves happiness or not," he replied. "I think we simply look for it, and sometimes we find it in the wrong places."

"Is this the wrong place?"

"Probably," Hernando admitted. "But I don't know if I care right now."

Ariadna sat up slightly, leaning on one elbow to get a better look.

"At the bar, I told you my story," she said. "But there are things I didn't tell you. Things I'm ashamed of."

"You don't have to tell me anything."

"I want to do it." Ariadna took a deep breath. "When Camila was eight, I almost left Emeterio. I had met someone, a man who worked at the bank where we had our accounts. He was kind, attentive, he made me laugh. We had an affair that lasted three months."

Hernando listened in silence, without judging.

"I fell in love," Ariadna continued, her voice cracking slightly. "Or so I thought. I planned to leave everything behind: Emeterio, the house, my comfortable life. I was ready to go with that man, take my daughters, start over."

"What happened?"

"He told me no." Ariadna laughed bitterly. "It turns out that for him I was just a fling, a fun distraction. When I told him I was willing to leave my husband, he panicked. He told me that what we had was a mistake, that he had his own family to protect."

"Swedenborg, a mystic I'm reading these days, would tell you that in the absence of conjugal love, you take refuge in carnal love, which is intense, fleeting, wild, but short-lived."

Ariadna watched him with that yearning face of a pupil who listens docilely to the teacher who, she already knows, will guide her through the labyrinth of knowledge.

"Perhaps you're right." Ariadna wiped away a tear. "I went back to Emeterio like a beaten dog. He never knew. And I swore I'd never be so stupid, so vulnerable again. That if I ever had another affair, it would be on my terms, with clear rules."

"You must not confuse carnal love with conjugal or spiritual love, which is proper to those who truly complement each other."

"And how can you tell if two spouses love each other?" Ariadna stared at him intently.

"Because a woman falls in love with a man's intelligence, and a man with the love his wife has for his intelligence."

"It sounds sexist."

"Not if you understand that all love is born from the woman and returns to her."

Ariadna's expression hardened, showing her disagreement for the first time.

"No love. No promises. No imaginary futures. Just this: stolen moments, shared pleasure, and then each goes back to their own life. No drama, no expectations, no broken hearts."

"Don't worry," Hernando reassured her. "We know that what we have is a carnal love."

"Thank you." Ariadna lay back down, staring at the ceiling. "I've learned that romantic love is a fairy tale they sell us to make us buy things. Reality is simpler: we're animals with needs. Connection, pleasure, validation. That's all."

Hernando felt a tightness in his chest. Was that really all there was to it? Had he been reduced to that after Nancy?

"Although I'm not sure I agree," he said softly.

"Of course not." Ariadna smiled sadly. "You're still young, Hernando. You still believe in true love, in Nancy waiting for you in Medellín, in happy endings. Give it time. Life will teach you."

"You sound very cynical."

"I sound realistic." Ariadna turned to him. "But don't get me wrong. I don't regret this. With you, I feel more like myself than I have in years. It's just... I don't expect this to save me anymore. I don't expect anything to save me anymore."

They remained silent for long minutes, each lost in their own thoughts. Outside, the city slept, unaware of the two broken souls clinging to each other in the darkness of an empty office.

Finally, Ariadna got up and began to dress, her movements mechanical and practiced, revealing that this was not her first infidelity. She buttoned her blouse meticulously, smoothed her hair with her fingers, and applied lipstick while looking at her reflection in the window.

"Will you come tomorrow?" she asked as she put on her shoes, her voice a mixture of hope and fatigue.

"Ramiro wants the project in ten days," Hernando replied evasively, still naked on the blankets.

"I'm not talking about the project," Ariadna smiled with a

mixture of coquetry and weariness. "I'm talking about us."

"Us," Hernando thought bitterly. There was no "us." There was only him, desperately trying to forget Nancy, and her, desperately trying to feel desired by someone other than her husband. "We are two shipwrecked souls clinging to the same piece of wood," he thought, "but we will both continue to sink."

"I will come," he finally said, not knowing if it was a promise or a sentence.

Ariadna approached and kissed him on the forehead, an almost maternal gesture that made him shudder, contrasting with the animal passion of moments before.

"Don't think so much, Hernando," she whispered. "Sometimes you just have to feel."

After Ariadna left, leaving a trail of her perfume in the air, Hernando remained lying on the makeshift bed. He felt dirty, not physically but spiritually, as if he had betrayed something fundamental within himself.

Did he want to be socially ostracized, throwing away the good name he had cultivated for decades, as Oscar Wilde did, who, by knowing the dark side of life, lost everything—reputation, family, freedom—for a tortuous affair with a young man, thus defying Victorian conventions? Sentenced in 1895 to two years of hard labor for "gross indecency," Wilde emerged broken, suffering from meningitis, wandering through Paris under the name Sebastian Melmoth until his death in 1900 at the age of forty-six in poverty. His last words: "Either this wallpaper goes, or I do," in open contradiction to what he had previously said about himself: "We all live in the gutter, but some of us look at the stars."

"And what am I looking at?" Hernando wondered, "the stream or the stars? Because from here, lying with another man's wife, I feel like a caricature of myself."

He finally got up and dressed slowly, each button a struggle. Looking out the window, he saw the streets of Bucaramanga stretching out before him, lit by orange streetlights that looked like fireflies trapped in a giant jar. The city slept, oblivious to his torment.

New verses emerged in his mind, darker than the previous ones:

Soulless flesh, nameless passion, abandonment is preferable to emptiness! I am a body that conforms without love, For pleasure, like beasts do, with a heart that has no right to beat!

Cesare Pavese, the Italian poet, also spent his life in love with unattainable women, writing about existential loneliness in works such as *The Business of Living*. Tormented by depression and unrequited love, Pavese attempted suicide several times before finally succeeding in 1950, at the age of forty-one, with a barbiturate overdose in a Turin hotel. His final note: "I forgive everyone and I ask everyone for forgiveness. Okay? Don't gossip too much."

"Will I ever reach that point?" Hernando wondered, feeling the weight of loneliness crush his chest. "Will I become another suicidal poet, another statistic of unrequited love?"

He grabbed his briefcase and left the office, closing the door carefully. The building was empty at that hour of the morning. His footsteps echoed in the hallway like the beating of a dying heart. When he reached the elevator, he saw his reflection in the polished metal doors: a thirty-year-old man who looked as if he had aged a decade in the last month. He had deep dark circles under his eyes, an unkempt beard, and eyes tired from lack of sleep.

"Is this all that's left of Hernando Villanueva?" he thought scornfully. "An architect who sleeps with married women and writes verses no one will ever read?"

The following days established a pattern. During the day, Hernando and Ariadna maintained a professional facade in the office, exchanging only meaningful glances and seemingly accidental touches. At night, when Ramiro left and the office was deserted, they surrendered to each other with an intensity bordering on desperation.

Ariadna brought wine for herself, regional fruit juices for Hernando—curuba, lulo, guanabana, loquat—typical food: dried meat, churrasco, sobrebarriga, llanera, mute, bandeja paisa, roast chicken, Chinese food... They turned the office into their private sanctuary, a space outside of time and consequences where they could be more honest versions of themselves.

One night, as they lay on the floor after making love, Ariadna

asked him:

"Do you think about her when you're with me?"

Hernando considered lying, but decided that Ariadna deserved the truth.

"Sometimes. Not all the time, but sometimes."

He expected her to be offended, but instead Ariadna laughed softly.

"That's fine. I sometimes think about the man on the bench. The one who broke my heart years ago. It's strange, isn't it? We're here together, but our minds are elsewhere."

"Does it bother you?"

"No." Ariadna traced invisible patterns on his chest. "We're using each other, Hernando. But we're doing it consciously, honestly. That's more than most couples can say."

"I suppose you're right."

"I have a question," Ariadna said after a pause. "If Nancy came back tomorrow, if she knocked on your door and told you she made a mistake, that she wants to get back together with you... what would you do?"

Hernando didn't have to think about the answer.

"I would go back to her."

"I knew it." Ariadna didn't sound hurt, just resigned. "And if Emeterio magically changed, if he suddenly became the attentive and passionate husband he never was, I'd probably try to make my marriage work. For my daughters, if not for myself."

"You seem very confident, Ariadna. I hope you're not wrong, because sometimes sex plays tricks on us."

Hernando paused, his gaze lost in the amber depths of his passionfruit juice glass. The conversation had struck a nerve, and the philosophical idea came to him not as an academic exercise, but as a personal warning.

"At my university," he continued, in a lower, more introspective tone, "we studied Paul Ricoeur and his reading of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*. In my own interpretation of those readings, I concluded that when the body takes hold of our will, the soul often humbles our reason before it."

He was silent for a moment, letting the words, dense and heavy,

settle in the space between them.

"In other words," he continued, raising his gaze to meet Ariadna's eyes, "it's not just a fit of lust. It's something deeper, more treacherous. It's biology disguised as destiny. We often fall in love even against what our minds believe and desire. Our best arguments, our clearest rules, our fragile sanity... all can be brought down by a whisper from the body that the soul, in its blind complicity, chooses to obey. You speak of sandcastles and waves, Ariadna, but Ricoeur reminds us that the tide isn't outside, but within us. And that reason, with all its pride, is sometimes the first to surrender."

He paused again, and his voice sounded almost like a warning whisper, to himself as much as to her.

"I know what I'm getting myself into."

"That's why I say you don't seem scared. But perhaps you should be. Not because of the inevitable end, but because of the possibility that this 'us' we now consider temporary... might cease to feel that way. And that, when that happens, neither your honesty nor my good intentions will be able to do anything. Because the soul will have already humbled reason, and the contract will have been broken without anyone having signed it."

"If that happens, I'll say I wished I were stronger, less in need of human connection. Would that be a bad thing?"

"There's nothing wrong with needing a connection."

They remained silent, drinking, two lonely souls sharing their loneliness but unable to truly alleviate it.

The project was finally completed. Hernando presented the final plans to Ramiro, who enthusiastically approved them. The client was satisfied, the contract was successfully closed, and there was no longer any reason to stay late at the office.

That last night, Hernando and Ariadna stayed anyway, knowing that it was a chapter that was closing.

"Emeterio returns the day after tomorrow," said Ariadna as she shared a bottle of wine, and Hernando a glass of water.

"I know."

"And the project is finished."

"I know."

"Then this is over."

Hernando nodded.

"What will you do?" Ariadna asked. "Will you look for Nancy?"

"Probably not. I think I need to be alone for a while. To figure out who I am without her, without this."

"I'll keep counting the days until Sofia turns eighteen." Ariadna smiled sadly.

"That's..."

"Seven years," Ariadna closed her eyes, "if we survive. Because now I'm sure I lied to you. Or I lied to myself. I developed feelings for you. You were... something real. Something important."

Hernando took her hand.

"For me too," he admitted.

"What a mess we are, aren't we?"

"The worst."

They embraced then, not with sexual passion but with something deeper: two broken souls recognizing their mutual pain, offering comfort without solutions, companionship without promises.

That night they made love for the last time, slowly and deliberately, savoring every moment because they knew it was the end. There were no screams or obscene words. Just two people holding each other in the darkness, trying to squeeze out every last drop of connection before reality claimed them back.

Then, while Ariadna was getting dressed to leave, Hernando wrote in his notebook:

Even when my heart is alone, and my soul breaks one more day, I will continue to love like the poets, with the intensity of one who has already died.

Ariadna read the verse over his shoulder and gently kissed his head.

"You were never mine to keep," she said tenderly.

They said goodbye at the office door with a long, melancholic kiss. They didn't promise to stay in touch or talk about seeing each other again. They both knew that a clean break was the healthiest thing to do.

Hernando watched her walk down the hallway, her heels clicking in the night's silence, until she disappeared into the

elevator. He stood there, staring at the closed doors, feeling that another chapter of his life was coming to an end.

Hernando stepped out of the building into the fresh early morning air. Dawn was beginning to paint the sky in shades of pink and violet, like an Impressionist canvas. The streets of Bucaramanga were almost deserted, with only a few early risers on their way to work.

He wandered aimlessly, processing everything that had happened. Perhaps he had learned that pain was inevitable. That to love meant risking loss. That seeking solace in lust could be a capital sin, but not a mortal one, which made him human, all too human. That people were by nature complex, containing contradictory multitudes, capable of kindness and selfishness simultaneously, of holiness and lust.

He had learned that Ariadna wasn't just "the married woman with whom he had an affair," but a whole person: mother, daughter, unfulfilled wife, frustrated dreamer, repressed woman seeking freedom. And in their moments together, even if stolen and doomed, there had been something real, something worth remembering without bitterness.

He arrived at a park and sat on a bench. A coffee vendor was starting to set up his cart, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee filling the air. He bought a cup and sat watching the city awaken. Workers on their way to their jobs, children in school uniforms, street vendors setting up their stalls. Life went on, indifferent to his personal dramas, his broken hearts, and his unread poems.

He needed that reminder that the world was bigger than his pain, that other people had their own struggles, their own lost loves, their own stolen moments.

He thought of Ariadna returning home, quietly slipping into bed before Camila and Sofia woke up, preparing to greet Emeterio with a fake smile and a rehearsed lie.

He took out his notebook and began to write. Not about Nancy specifically, nor about Ariadna, but about the universal pain of love, about the human condition of seeking connection in a world that seemed designed to keep us apart. He wrote until the sun was high in the sky, until the park was crowded, until his hand ached

and his coffee went cold.

And when he finally closed the notebook, he felt something he hadn't felt in weeks: not peace, but acceptance that his life was a mess, that he had made mistakes, that he had hurt and been hurt.

But also acceptance that it would go on. Because all life was a series of problems to solve where human beings fell, got up, fell again, and kept trying until they died.

He stood up, put the notebook in his briefcase, and started walking toward his apartment. He had to shower, get dressed, go to work. Life went on, with or without Nancy, with or without Ariadna, with or without love.

That afternoon, in the office, Hernando and Ariadna crossed paths in the hallway. She was carrying a folder with documents, he a cup of coffee. They looked at each other for a long moment, heavy with all that had gone unsaid, all that had been shared during those stolen nights.

"Good morning," Ariadna said in a professional voice.

"Good morning," Hernando replied.

And they continued walking in opposite directions, two strangers who had shared intimacies they could never confess to anyone else, two accomplices in a crime with no visible victims but with consequences that both would silently bear.

Later Ramiro summoned him.

"Hernando, I need to talk to you."

"Tell me."

"We have an important client. A luxury apartment tower. They want something innovative, something that will make a difference in the market." Ramiro placed a folder on the desk. "I thought of you to lead it."

Hernando opened the folder, flipping through the project requirements. It was large, complex, the kind of assignment that could define a career.

"It's a lot of work," he observed.

"That's why I thought of you." Ramiro sat on the edge of the desk. "You've shown dedication, Hernando. You finished that last project ahead of schedule, with exceptional quality. The client was delighted."

"Of course," Hernando thought bitterly, "nothing like an illicit affair to motivate productivity."

"Thank you for your trust," he said aloud.

"There's one more thing." Ramiro looked at him intently. "This project requires travel. Mainly to Medellín. Meetings with investors, presentations to boards of directors. Do you feel up to it?"

The city where Nancy had studied, where Ariadna had grown up. A city full of ghosts of lives never lived.

"When do we start?" he asked.

"Next week." Ramiro stood up. "Get your portfolio ready. You're going to need it."

When Ramiro left, Hernando leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. A new project, new responsibilities, new distractions. Perhaps that was exactly what he needed: something to focus his energy on other than pain, memories, and nostalgia.

He opened his eyes and looked again toward Ariadna. She had finished her call and was now typing something on her computer, her face a mask of professional concentration. As if the last few weeks hadn't happened. As if they were simply two colleagues sharing an office space.

And perhaps, in time, that was exactly what they would become again.

That night, in his apartment, Hernando poured himself a glass of kumis he had bought at the market. He sat on the sofa, leaving the left cushion empty out of habit, though he no longer knew for whom he left it empty: for Nancy, who would never return? For Ariadna, who would never be his? For a version of himself that had died with every disappointment?

He picked up his notebook and flipped through the pages filled with verses. "Poems to Nancy," the cover read, but as he read the verses now, he realized they were no longer about Nancy, but about him—brutal cries about his need for love, his inability to be alone, his tendency to idealize what he was losing.

Ariadna closed the door with a reverential air, like someone re-entering a silent pact. The air conditioner exhaled its constant, cold hum, and Emeterio's snores filled the room with a steady,

contented rhythm, like a man sleeping with the tranquility of someone who believes he has already won.

She took off her shoes slowly, her toes sliding out as if releasing an old weariness. She left them by the wardrobe, perfectly aligned, and settled under the Italian silk sheets that he had changed with almost religious punctuality. "Important people sleep soundly," he would say, without irony, convinced that the order of objects maintains the order of the world.

Emeterio stirred, not fully awake; one eyelid barely lifted, just enough to recognize her.

"Have you arrived yet, Mommy?" he murmured, his voice still tangled in sleep.

"Yes," she replied, in a tone he associated with care, but which was, rather, practical. "The meeting was long."

He yawned, extending his heavy arm over the pillow before letting it fall onto her waist, a gesture that was never abrupt, but inevitable, like the closing of a door that has been designed not to open in another direction.

"And Ramiro?" he asked then, in his half-asleep way, always attentive to the business. "Did you tell him about the project? We have to remind him that the clients come through me, not him."

Ariadna inclined her head toward him and touched his forehead with her lips. It wasn't a caress; it was a gesture of obedience.

"I told him. He understood."

That was enough. He didn't need details, explanations, narratives. The important things in his world were contained in short, absolute phrases.

He drew her to him, gently, but with an unquestioning certainty. The kiss was wet, warm, tinged with the scent of expensive whiskey and reheated dinner—a gesture of desire, but also a reminder of who owned what. His hand traveled up the hem of her nightgown with the familiarity of something that had been his for years.

"You're cold," he said, simply stating it, without suspicion or reproach. "You must have bathed very late."

"It helps clear my head," Ariadna replied, letting herself be guided by his weight.

He let out a short laugh, the kind he used when he felt

invulnerable, when he had accomplished something during the day that didn't need to be told.

"You don't need to think so much."

And he took her. There was no violence, but neither was there tenderness. There was an internal, almost ancient, logic to the way they moved: he occupying the space, she yielding it with ritual precision. Ariadna responded at the moments she knew by heart, breathing where he expected, arching her back when he believed he could provoke more than mere reflexes.

"Tell me I'm the only one," he whispered, now without his mask, without his arrogance, without his persona.

She said it, not because she believed in words, but because she knew that there, precisely there, lay the balance of the house. When her husband ejaculated, she settled back, breathing with quiet satisfaction, as if the world had been restored to its rightful place. He didn't boast. He didn't seek confirmation. His certainty was older and deeper than ego.

Ariadna turned off the lamp and lay down, her eyes open, staring at the ceiling. Silence returned, and with it, the memory of different hands: hands that moved toward her skin hesitantly, as if afraid of spoiling something precious; the voice that called her name not with possession, but with discovery.

She thought of Hernando, of the way he looked before he touched her. She bit her lip. She didn't cry, she just let the memory envelop her, warm and light, like a blanket protecting her from everything else.

The house remained in its costly calm and so did she, but she knew—with that pained, quiet clarity that needs no words—that nothing in it was at peace.

The next day, life went on. Hernando at his desk, drawing lines that would become buildings. Ariadna at hers, answering calls and organizing schedules. Ramiro in his office, worrying about budgets and deadlines.

As if nothing had happened. As if the last few weeks had been a parenthesis, an anomaly that reality had efficiently corrected.

But in Hernando's notebook, the verses remained. And in Ariadna's heart, the memories lingered. And somewhere in the

space between what was and what could have been, their story existed, small and invisible, but real.

A story of two castaways who briefly met in the ocean of loneliness, who shared a piece of wood for a time, and then continued floating in opposite directions, carrying with them the mark of the other, imperceptible to the world but indelible in their own lives.

And so, amidst abandoned alcohol and regional fruit juices, between architectural plans and necessary lies, between Nancy and Emeterio, between the painful past and the frightening future, Hernando Villanueva and Ariadna moved forward.

Because that was all they could do. That was all anyone could do.

Keep going, one day at a time, one line at a time, one verse at a time.

Until life, in its infinite cruelty or mercy, decided to write the next chapter.

Outside, Bucaramanga awoke to another day. Street vendors hawked their wares, buses roared through the narrow streets, and students hurried to their classes. Life in its organized chaos, in its imperfect beauty, in its inexplicable persistence.

They had simply been themselves.

And that, perhaps, was enough.

Or at least, it should be.

Hernando closed his eyes for a moment, took a deep breath, and returned to his plans. One line, then another, then another. Building structures he would never inhabit, designing spaces he would never fill with his own life, but building nonetheless, and in that, at least, there was some hope, fragile, yet persistent, like a small light in the darkness, or like a verse that insists on being written, like a heart that insists on beating despite everything.

5. *The harms of seduction*

The next day, Hernando Villanueva found himself sitting at a varnished wooden desk, one of those institutional pieces of furniture that creak under the weight of the collective memory of generations of students, surrounded by six scattered souls in the semi-circular classroom of the Autonomous University of the Garden. The air was saturated with the fumes of cheap disinfectant, scents that evoked Hernando's school days, those years when his stutter made him the target of mockery—an echo that still resounded in his ears like a dissonant counterpoint in an unfinished symphony.

He listened attentively to the voice of his new teacher, Marianne, a slender blonde with green eyes that seemed taken from a Renaissance landscape, dressed in a fitted skirt that traced the curvature of her hips with almost architectural precision, as if the fabric itself were a blueprint calculated to highlight the human form.

Marianne walked around the classroom with the grace of a dancer, her French accent coloring an impeccable Spanish that betrayed years of forced adaptation, a voluntary exile that Hernando sensed was laden with untold stories.

"My passion, as you already know, is the violin. In this course we will learn to distinguish a good performer from a dilettante."

"What is a *dilettante*?" asked a man in a pristine sky-blue silk suit and black bow tie. "An amateur?"

"I doubt any of you is a music critic in a city that has no opera," she replied with an irony that cut like the edge of a Wagner score, "more than a million inhabitants and not even a permanent theater, and whose symphony orchestras are totally dependent on two universities."

Her words went beyond disdain and became a reflection on the cultural provincialism of Bucaramanga, that Andean plateau where classical music arrived as a distant echo from Europe, filtered

through university budgets and the apathy of an elite more interested in soccer than in Beethoven. Hernando, with his architect's mind, saw parallels: just as his designs for the women's prison had been constrained by political budgets, local culture was a crowded structure where art struggled for space in cells of indifference.

Marianne stared at Hernando, and he, accustomed to beautiful women studying his curved eyelids—those eyelids that in his adolescence had been a source of insecurity, inherited from a Santanderian mother with almond-shaped eyes—felt a slight tingling at the nape of his neck.

"Now I'd like you to tell me what your interest in this course is."

A heavy silence settled for a few moments in the classroom, where personal motivations intertwined with social expectations. Hernando looked around at the other students: a teenage girl with prominent breasts who was doodling in her notebook, a young man with a thick head of hair who seemed more interested in his phone, and others who represented the diversity of a course open to the community—professionals in search of distraction, curious retirees, frustrated dreamers.

"Are you asking me?"

"First volunteer."

The other students laughed, a nervous laugh that broke the tension and reminded Hernando of his school days, when Riakola and his gang called him "Tatareto," an expression of a personal and social conflict, a microcosm of the school hierarchy where the weak were molded by the strong, forging either resilience or lifelong resentment.

"I was born in Bucaramanga," he said slowly. "I'm thirty years old. I studied architecture at Santo Tomás University."

His voice was firm now, but inside he reflected on how that childhood stutter had been the catalyst for his ambition: to overcome the mockery, he had thrown himself into books, into drawings, into the precision of architectural lines that spoke for themselves.

"What have you designed?" Marianne asked with apparent

interest, although Hernando detected a provocative undertone, as if she were testing the layers of his character.

"Several buildings. The new women's prison, for example."

Marianne recoiled slightly, her expression shifting from curiosity to ethical judgment.

"The prison?"

The word *prison* hung in the air for a moment, as if it had been pronounced with ceremonial weight, with the dark aura reserved for irreversible words. Marianne had said it without violence, but her voice carried the edge of truths that pierce without raising a hand. Hernando felt the conversation fill with shadows, and the teenage girl with ripe breasts, who had been smiling with the floral unconsciousness of her age, lowered her eyes, afraid to peer into a well whose depth she ignored.

"They say the cells are overcrowded," Marianne added, not in an accusatory tone, but with that way women have of observing the world and letting fall on it a sentence that is never signed yet always carried out.

The back of Hernando's neck burned. The prison—*that* project—was an imperfect construction, an open wound. It did not appear to him in blueprints or models, but in the numb flesh of the night, in the faint creak of the window when the Bucaramanga wind coiled through the blinds, bringing him the murmur of the women who breathed their confinement.

During the rainy years in Brussels, he had believed that coming back would be a return to the origin: to the warm land, to the smell of orchids falling onto the sidewalk and fermenting in the sun, to the murmur of markets where tomatoes gleam like humble rubies. But upon returning he found that the city had changed its skin: contracts were signed with winks and silences, bids had owners before they were born, and architecture—that ancient art of taming light—had been domesticated by the petty arithmetic of the budget.

And there he was, Hernando, an architect in theory and a bricklayer of the State in practice, tracing narrow corridors where the air swirled like a frightened animal; designing yards where the shadow of the walls fell upon bodies like a perpetual warning;

segmenting life into rectangles, as if existence could be folded and filed away in numbered drawers.

His work did not belong to him; it even contradicted him. He had given up form and lost the soul. The prison was his bastard daughter, his accuser, a building that stared back at him. During the nights, when sleep broke against his side like a shattered wave, he understood that he was no longer acting as an architect but as an instrument. His hands—hands that in childhood had drawn imaginary temples with shoeboxes and Popsicle sticks—now measured the space needed to lock up a body, so it could stand, lie down, crouch, cry without its sobs invading the neighboring cubicle.

He was the servile draftsman of a punishment he had not chosen. The very process of his work had betrayed him, turning him into a gear in the machine that grinds dignity and serves it at noon on legal trays. Another, denser fog revealed itself to him: by participating in the architecture of confinement, he had stopped recognizing himself in his own human shape.

The creative act that defines man as maker of worlds had been reduced to an administrative operation. If building had once been a visible prayer, now it was a renunciation. Hernando no longer created for people to inhabit; he raised walls that confirmed his spiritual defeat. And, as if fate were an acid spilled without warning, he understood that the prison also distanced him from others. He had seen the files: the women who would end up living in those cells were monsters and shadows for their stabbed or defenestrated victims, but also mothers who had stolen milk, teenage girls who had hidden knives to defend themselves from men with first and last names and uniforms, empanada vendors who had dodged an abusive tax, women whose greatest fault had been to be born where justice is a luxury and poverty a prenatal sentence.

Meanwhile—he knew it, he knew it—other women, the ones with linen dresses and double last names, had suites guaranteed for them in private wings of the prison, where punishment looked more like a spiritual retreat supervised by discreet uniforms. Hernando was the architect of that distinction, the bricklayer of privilege, the draftsman of inequality.

Marianne spoke again, with the serenity of someone holding a glass without hurrying to empty it.

"They say a prison reflects society," she murmured.

He looked up. In that sentence he felt that she had seen everything: the origin of his shame, the root of his insomnia, the pact he had signed with the shadows. The prison did not reflect society; it *was* society in miniature, and surely more honest, candid, visceral, without masks or pretexts. There were the hierarchies, the violence, the economics of punishment, the genealogy of fear, and he—Hernando—had been their architect.

He then felt that the true prison, beyond the building, was the certainty—indestructible, absolute, without possible appeal—that he had built a wall that now contained him, without doors and without exit plans.

Hernando blushed, as in his childhood, when his father, a frustrated engineer, scolded him for not defending himself.

"I'm an architect," he apologized, "not a politician."

"And that exempts you from responsibility?"

"I'm not the one who decides how many women should be locked up in each cell."

Marianne smiled at a student with the thick hair.

"Next," she said.

Hernando slumped in his desk, visibly irritated, his mind drifting to the past: the prison emerged as a symbol of his failed commitment to Nancy, who had encouraged him to take the project for the money, promising a future together that evaporated with her departure for Medellín. Within that ethical conflict he pondered individual responsibility in a collective system where the characters debated society's sickness in bars and parks frozen by time.

When class ended, Hernando headed to the parking lot, carrying a notebook full of hurried sketches, and stopped in front of the UNAJ tower, a low-budget reproduction of the bell tower of St. Mark's Basilica in Venice, a monument to provincial ambition, a pastiche that Hernando silently criticized as a metaphor for Colombian identity: minimalist miniature copies of European glories, erected with tight budgets.

He pulled out his notebook and let his fingers copy a design of his gabled cabin, that dream refuge on the outskirts of Piedecuesta, a personal project that represented his yearning for isolation, a counterpoint to urban life that had been suffocating him since Nancy's departure.

"I think I owe you an apology," he heard behind him.

When he turned he found his teacher's radiant face, lit by the evening light filtering through the centuries-old trees.

"You'll have to make it in public," Hernando replied, in a playful tone that hid his surprise.

Marianne shrugged, a Gallic gesture that betrayed her origin.

"Fine."

Hernando studied her pensively, speculating about this woman who was breaking into his life like an unexpected leitmotif in a sonata.

"You surprise me," he said.

"Why?"

"People from Santander never apologize."

It was a generalization but rooted in his experience: the Santander region, with its history of fierce independence and stoic character, produced men and women who saw apologizing as weakness, a cultural conflict Hernando had internalized in his youth when his stutter had forced him to swallow his words rather than retract them. The few times he had done so, his classmates had humiliated him in the most ignominious way:

"Even Hernando has begged me to forgive him!"

When she laughed, Marianne revealed the result of a professional teeth-whitening, a luxury that by 2006 had ceased to be one and had become a social obligation. Hernando noticed the almost glassy gleam of her teeth, too perfect, and thought about the paradox: people followed to the letter the fashion of a radiant smile, promoted in all the magazines, while willingly ignoring that the same treatment that gave their teeth that porcelain shine irreversibly eroded the protective enamel. It was the triumph of surface over substance.

"I forgot to ask about your interest in music," she added. "Do you play any instrument?"

"The piano…"

"Seriously?"

"I'm only a beginner. Beethoven's *Mondschein* moved me, and I wanted to learn to play it. In your class I should have explained that I *am* that melody."

His words were a confession: the "Moonlight Sonata" reflected his melancholic soul, that *adagio sostenuto* that evoked the slowness of his recovery after Nancy, an inner storm where music kept him afloat on the tide of his emotional emptiness. Hans Castorp in *The Magic Mountain* also finds in the gramophone a balm for his spiritual illness.

Marianne looked at him with a growing smile, and Hernando felt the beginning of an attraction, a love threatened from its genesis by the ghosts of his recent heartbreaks.

"May I invite you for a coffee?"

They walked under the enormous trees more than sixty years old—ceibas and rain trees planted in the republican era, silent witnesses to university history from the student protests of the seventies to the current neoliberal reforms. In the forest café at UNAJ, an idyllic corner that contrasted with the city, Marianne dissolved a packet of sugar into her coffee, a mechanical gesture that betrayed nervousness.

"Each cell should be for a single prisoner," Hernando said, returning to the topic of the prison, "but we don't live in the best of all possible worlds."

"Voltaire."

"His most famous quote."

"Vous parlez très bien le français."

"Mais, contrairement à la plupart de ses lecteurs, je crois que nous vivons dans le meilleur de tous les mondes."

Reflecting on Leibniz and his optimism, Hernando saw an irony in it: his life, with its losses—Nancy, the dignity he had dreamed of reclaiming after leaving Brussels—was the best possible world because it had forged him in resilience.

"Un monde évanescent: c'est ne pas le meilleur."

"I don't think it's evanescent," Hernando replied, "but your accent is flawless. Did you grow up in France?"

"I spent the first seventeen years of my life in Besançon, that city fortified by Vauban, with its Doubs River and its history of watches and resistance. I studied there until my father left my mother, my brother Julian, and me. I became withdrawn after he moved to Colombia and took refuge in reading the volumes of La Pléiade. That's how I became a cultured little girl."

"A great reader of Voltaire and Rousseau," Hernando flattered her.

"I only know their most famous works," Marianne smiled. "Until the day my mother lost control of her car on an icy road. I decided then to live with my father and his second wife in their house in Lagos del Cacique, in Bucaramanga. Now I live with my half-brother Leonardo, with whom I have an excellent relationship."

"I wouldn't have guessed. Your Spanish is perfect. How long have you been here?"

"Four years. My dad was from Tunja; my mom from La Veze, a village in Franche-Comté."

"Not far from Switzerland."

"I'm surprised by your knowledge of European geography."

"I hope to surprise you more."

"Almost at the same time I arrived, my father suffered the death of his second wife," Marianne said with a bitter look. "He couldn't recover, and he had a heart attack six weeks later."

"From loneliness?"

"I'm witness to it," Marianne replied as two tears rolled down her cheeks. Hernando drifted into his inner conflict: parental love as an opiate more powerful than any religion, and its absence as a void that Marianne filled with art and teaching, playing the violin masterfully in a world that saw her as a foreigner.

"There aren't many foreigners in Colombia," Hernando nodded. "The media have, in a way, isolated us. We see the same political faces every day, because they want to impose their rule on us. This isolation is the real cause of the national conflict: decades of violence that close our borders, turning Colombia into a cultural island where diversity is reduced to stereotypes. Not even Bogotá, the capital, escapes them."

"A tragedy," Marianne agreed. "The day there is peace in Colombia, we'll hear more diverse and honest voices. Being a politician today is basically lobbying the media."

"Beautiful theory," Hernando replied. "I lived in Brussels for three years."

"Did you study there?"

"No; I worked in a warehouse. I moved boxes. The kind of work foreigners do."

Those years were a dark chapter in his biography: after university, fleeing a youthful heartbreak—a girlfriend who left him for a more eloquent classmate—he had emigrated with a work visa, carrying twenty-kilo boxes through the fog, learning basic Flemish and reflecting on the irony of being a "foreigner" in Europe while Colombians back home fought for visas. He returned transformed, valuing the Andean sun as a divine gift.

"Was it a bad experience?"

"No, on the contrary. I learned to value what God gives me: our fruits, our mountains, our vegetation… It's exuberant and, above all, the sun. Look how it lights up the Andes at sunset."

Hernando raised his index finger, and Marianne contemplated a mountain bathed in the yellow light of dusk, a symbol of the ephemeral and the eternal.

"You have to live through a winter abroad to appreciate it."

"Believe it or not, that's why I live in Colombia."

"Really?"

"One day, reading Camus, I learned that the Algerian, though poor, was happier than the Frenchman because he has the sun."

"I must reread *L'Étranger*."

A shadow fell upon them.

"How's my buddy Tatareto?" asked a stocky, bald man of about thirty, his face twisted with anger. He extended his hand in apparent camaraderie, with a mocking smile that grated on Hernando.

Hernando perceived his immaturity and insecurity, a conflict rooted in their schooldays: Riakola, the bully from San Martín de Porras School, son of a prosperous merchant, had channeled his family frustrations—a distant father, a domineering mother—into

bullying, imitating Hernando's stutter, his scapegoat. Years later, Riakola enjoyed luxuries such as a bachelor apartment in Cabecera and a 2005 Dodge Ram parked next to the Fourth Stage Mall. It was said—an open secret—that his fortune was the fruit of covert criminal activities.

"Riako!" exclaimed Marianne.

"Can't I say hello to…?" Riakola said with mockery. "What did your old man name you again? Hernando? Yeah. The Stut-tut-tut-tut-terer: I used to ride him hard in school."

"Without your taunts, Riakola," Hernando replied, "I'd never be what… what I am."

The residual stutter had once been a nervous tic, but now he used it as a rhetorical device, which, according to his reading, gave his interlocutor a deceptive sense of control.

"And you think you're cured?" Riakola laughed. "See how I throw your dearest traumas back at you? I'll be your lovely bully forever, buddy Stutterer."

"I'd say we're just acquaintances," Hernando shot back, suddenly inflamed, "and in a way you never forget."

"Don't be ungrateful, Stutterer. What do you mean acquaintances? Friends. Soulmates, practically gay, right?"

Hernando drained his coffee. Marianne looked at him, distressed.

"Don't tell me this jerk is one of your students," Riakola said.

"When are you going to express yourself properly, Riako?"

"This is how we talk in this city, baby, I've already told you. When are you gonna learn the local dialect, my slang?"

"I prefer to enjoy my ignorance," Marianne said, taking Hernando's hand.

Riakola's eyes flashed with the fire fueled by his failed relationship with Marianne: she, initially attracted by his "roughness" as an antithesis to her refined upbringing, had discovered his vacuity in his exaggerated attachment to brands and celebrity culture.

"Stutterer couldn't even finish a sentence in school. He'd try to insult me: 'You son of a bi-bi-bi-bi—,' the bastard. We'd crack up every time he spoke. 'Of course I'm your daddy!' I'd say. And listen

to him now! How he's reformed!"

"We all change, Riakola," Hernando nodded. "Few of us stay the same, and only a minority keep their feminine nicknames."

"Are you insinuating I'm immature? Grow up, man!"

"True. I kept my childhood; you, I think, kept your adolescence."

"You want me to break that nose job of yours?"

Hernando rose from his seat, defiant. A group of onlookers had gathered around them.

"Deck him!" someone said.

"Don't let that fag walk all over you," another voice chimed in.

Hernando spotted two men in black silk jackets and pants, yellow shirts, white ties, dark glasses, and slicked-back hair, about thirty-five and fifty-five years old. He was facing a mafioso with his bodyguards, like in Chicago in the 1920s.

"Hey, babe," Riakola said, ignoring Hernando's anger, "how about a little bottle of tequila?"

"I already told you I wouldn't go out with you again."

"Damn, you look so hot when you talk to me like that."

"Excuse me," Marianne said to Hernando as she grabbed her purse.

"I was just leaving," Hernando said.

"I'll walk you out."

Marianne took Hernando by the arm and walked ahead of the perplexed crowd.

"Aren't they gonna fight?" the younger bodyguard asked as he lit a cigarette.

Riakola slammed his fist on the café table and followed them at a cautious distance. Several onlookers egged him on:

"Don't be a pussy, hit him!"

"Don't let him steal your girl."

"Pleased to meet you, Hernando," Marianne said. "I'm sorry about the circumstances. That guy was my boyfriend…"

"Your lover, baby!" Riakola corrected her from behind. "Has she told you I've been her best lay?"

"…But we don't have anything now," Marianne finished.

"He's a nightmare," Hernando said.

"I know."

"What attracted you to him?"

"Nothing."

"His surliness?"

"I wanted to get to know a social misfit," Marianne replied. "I hope you're not one of those men who look for a spotless woman as a wife."

Hernando liked that expression. "Spotless" was more precise than "virgin," less physiological, more spiritual, a revocation of the purity so cherished by the bourgeois old men in Molière, so present in Colombian society, as evidenced by the boom in hymenoplasties, cosmetic surgeries to reconstruct the hymen.

"I'd like to invite you to dinner," Hernando proposed in French.

"To a restaurant?"

"To my apartment."

Marianne stopped and glanced sideways at Riakola, who was muttering incoherent words with growing irritation.

"Why not?" Marianne smiled.

"Could it be this Friday at six in the evening?"

"You have my cell number on your course syllabus. Send me your address and I'll gladly come visit you."

"Any preference? Vegetarian? Allergic to anything?"

"Only to too much salt or too much sugar."

"D'accord!"

Marianne kissed him on the cheek and walked away, her hips swaying under a silk skirt that revealed the straps of a tiny thong.

Riakola intercepted her minutes later in the parking lot, his shadow falling over the small lime-green 2002 Volkswagen Beetle like a familiar storm cloud.

"And what about that son of a bitch?" he spat, eyes bloodshot, jerking his chin toward where Hernando had been. "Is he the replacement? Is he already whispering cultured promises in your ear so you'll forget what we had? I mean, has he already asked for it?"

Marianne didn't even flinch. She slid the key into the Beetle's lock.

"Goodbye, Riakola. This is pathetic already."

Her indifference, after a month of enduring his calls and messages, made him explode. He blocked her path, grabbing her brusquely by the arm.

"Answer me! Were those three weeks crap to you? Is that all they were?"

Marianne slowly turned her head. There was no surprise in her expression, only an infinite weariness.

"You have five seconds to let go. I'm not going to repeat myself."

"You and your empty threats, as always," he snapped, but his grip weakened.

"Three," she counted, her voice serene and sharp as a diamond.

"Fine!" he shouted, releasing her as if her skin now burned him. "But you're wrong about me!"

She opened the door but turned to deliver the final blow, the one she had kept during this month of silence.

"I wasn't wrong, Riakola. During those three weeks I tried to find something beneath the façade. The waitress at the club, Sandra, swore you were an incredible lover, a legend. Now, after a month to think about it, I'm sure you paid her to say that. Because after an entire month of reflection, the only thing I remember is a narcissist who posed in front of the mirror more than he looked at me, an egotist who turned every dinner into a monologue about his truck and his 'businesses,' and a womanizer who literally received a message from another woman on our second date."

Riakola paled. The truth lashed his face.

"You already knew that… and you kept seeing me. There must've been a reason! I swear what I feel for you is different, I love you…"

Marianne let out a cold laugh.

"Love me? If it were love, you wouldn't have bragged a week in about being a 'free spirit,' about your preference for polyamory and swinger clubs. Those aren't preferences, Riakola. They're symptoms of a pathetic fear of intimacy and stability. You're a tourist in relationships, not a builder. I've read a lot about guys like you in psychology magazines, and it all points to the same thing:

promiscuous men like you, with traits of the 'Dark Triad'—narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism—tend to choose short-term mating strategies, avoiding deep commitments because their low sexual disgust lets them jump from partner to partner without remorse."

"Sexual disgust? I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"It's the revulsion we feel toward promiscuity; understand that it's thanks to the fear we have of venereal diseases that we avoid becoming slaves to sex."

"Are you going to start again with your Plato story, to prove that it's not my head ruling me but my dick?"

"People like you, with no sexual disgust, can have sex with multiple partners without feeling repulsed by smells, tastes, the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, or the idea of 'sharing' a recent partner with someone else, because your brain doesn't activate that protective alarm."

"This is what I like about you," Riakola said, shifting into a more conciliatory attitude. "That you read and you know how to teach. So go on, I'm all ears."

"For example," Marianne sighed, running her fingers over the steering wheel without turning on the engine, "in a 2021 study on the Dark Triad and sociosexuality, published in specialized journals, participants with high levels of psychopathy reported a greater number of sexual partners, a preference for casual relationships and one-night stands, all mediated by low disgust toward varied and taboo sex, including acts like masochism or casual oral sex. You're one of those individuals high in psychopathy with high perceived mate value, the most promiscuous because of their reduced sexual disgust, which makes it easier to have more partners and more variety in sex without feeling revulsion toward taboo behaviors."

Riakola tried to interrupt, muttering something about how he wasn't like that, but Marianne cut him off with an icy look and continued her relentless dissection.

"And that's not all. Evolution itself seems to have shaped narcissism in men as a tactic to maximize potential partners,

according to a 2015 study on narcissism and short-term mating strategies. It details how narcissistic participants, especially those with maladaptive facets like exploitation and a sense of superiority, reported higher rates of marital infidelity—for example, married people who admitted multiple partners in the past year had significantly higher narcissistic scores, with a notable effect in exhibitionism and entitlement. It's also linked to behaviors like 'mate poaching,' where they try to attract someone already in a relationship for casual sex, and subtle sexual aggression, such as threatening to end the relationship if there's no sex or forcing intimacy under the influence of alcohol."

Her voice remained calm, but every word was a nail in the coffin of what Riakola had believed to be his irresistible charm. She had spent the month not just healing but arming herself with knowledge.

"Your 'flings' aren't romantic adventures; they're predictable disasters. Remember how on our third date you casually mentioned that ex who 'still wrote to you'? Classic of a promiscuous man who uses subtle sexual coercion and 'steals' other people's partners. And about infidelity, another recent analysis debunks the myth that grandiose narcissists like you cheat more by default, but they do when their ego feels threatened, turning every relationship into a minefield of betrayals."

Without giving him time for a reply that would never come, Marianne started the engine and drove away.

Shattered, Riakola vented his rage on an innocent empty soda can, which rolled away with a pitiful clang. It was the perfect echo of a thirty-something man trapped in the skin of a sulking teenager, unable to understand that in the adult world, roughness is not strength, and introspection is the only path to anything worthwhile.

At dawn, in an office overlooking Las Palmas Park, Hernando typed a letter at his computer, a message to a client about delays in the project, reflecting on his solid structures versus his fragile emotions.

Ariadna walked in with a gift-wrapped package in her hands.

"Happy Love and Friendship Day!" she exclaimed.

"For me?"

"Of course."

Hernando kissed her on the cheek and opened the box: a bottle of Chivas Regal whisky.

"Thank you," he smiled, disenchanted.

Ariadna remained silent for a moment, her fingers drumming on the polished wood of the desk as she searched for the right words. She had been going over the matter for a week, but now, looking him in the eye, she knew she could no longer stay quiet.

"I don't know what you think of me, Hernando," she said, leaning on his desk, "but you've awakened feelings in me that I never thought I'd experience again."

She paused, took a deep breath.

"And I need to tell you something that happened a week ago. Something that… that's been tormenting me. And I also need to tell you why I've waited so long to tell you."

Hernando stopped typing and turned his chair to face her. There was something in the intensity of her gaze that alarmed him.

"A week ago I got home late," Ariadna began, her voice barely a whisper. "Emeterio was awake, waiting for me. You know how he is: possessive, territorial, but… that night was different."

She stood up from the desk and walked to the window, turning her back to Hernando, as if she needed distance in order to speak.

"I closed the bedroom door with that barely audible click as always. The air conditioner was humming low, but instead of the usual snoring, I found him sitting on the bed, leaning against the headboard with a self-help book on his lap and a glass of whisky in his hand. The bluish light from the screen lit his face from below, giving him an almost ghostly aspect."

Hernando kept silent, feeling the office air thicken.

"I took off my shoes carefully and left them by the closet. He didn't look up. 'You're late,' he said, without inflection, without accusation, just stating a fact. I answered with the usual excuse: it had been a long meeting, you know, new clients."

Ariadna hugged herself, staring at the treetops in the park.

"Emeterio took a sip of whisky, closed his Og Mandino book with deliberate slowness, and set it on the nightstand. Then he looked at me, and in his eyes I saw something I hadn't seen in years:

vulnerability. 'Come sit down,' he said, patting the space next to him."

"Vulnerability?" Hernando asked, surprised.

"Yes." Ariadna turned to look at him. "I quickly put on my nightgown—the one that smells of lavender from the market—and sat on the edge of the bed, keeping my distance. I asked him what was wrong. He turned the glass between his fingers and said, 'I've been wanting to ask you a question for a while, but I was afraid of the answer.'"

Ariadna came back to the desk and sat on the edge, now closer to Hernando.

"'You? Afraid?' I tried to joke. But he didn't smile. He asked me directly, without beating around the bush: 'Do you think I'm gay?'"

Hernando's eyes widened.

"I froze," she went on. "The world stopped. Why was he asking me that? 'What?' was all I could say. He set his glass on the nightstand and rubbed his face with both hands. 'I've noticed how you've been looking at me lately,' he said. 'As if you were studying me. As if you were trying to figure something out.'"

"And what did you say?" Hernando asked, leaning forward.

"Nothing, at first. Because it was true. Two weeks ago, Hernando, I found his computer unlocked. I was looking for a work document and…"—she stopped, biting her lip—"I saw his history. Page after page of gay porn. Videos, images. All very… specific."

The silence in the office grew dense.

"I told him no, of course I didn't think he was gay. But he knows me; he knows when I'm lying. He laughed, but it was a bitter, tired laugh. 'You found my browsing history, didn't you?' he asked. There was no point in denying it. I nodded."

Ariadna lowered her eyes to her hands.

"Then Emeterio explained. He told me he isn't gay, that he's never been with a man, that he never would. 'It's the taboo,' he said. 'The forbidden. That's what excites me. It's always been like that. But my real tastes, what truly attracts me, are women. You.'"

"Did you believe him?" Hernando asked.

"I don't know," Ariadna admitted. "But what came next was worse. He took my hand, Hernando, and spoke with a calm that terrified me. He said, 'I know I travel a lot. I know I leave you alone for weeks. I know you could… have someone else.'"

Hernando's heart began to beat faster.

"I told him there was no one else," Ariadna continued, and Hernando noticed her hands trembling slightly. "But he raised a hand to stop me. 'If there is,' he said, 'it's better if you don't tell me. Because I would forgive *you*, Ariadna. You're my wife, the mother of my future children, my investment. But the other man…'"—she stopped, her voice breaking—"'I'll kill him. Simple as that. To me, the guilty ones are always the men. Women are weak; they get carried away. But men know what they're doing.'"

Hernando turned pale.

"Are you telling me that…?"

Ariadna suddenly doubled over laughing.

"Don't be scared," she chuckled quickly. "That was my greatest fear, but…"—she took a deep breath—"what he actually said is embarrassing."

Hernando sighed with relief. It wasn't worth risking his life for a lascivious woman.

"What did he say?"

"That if I had a lover, he wouldn't care as long as he didn't find out," Ariadna lied, holding Hernando's gaze. "That what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him. That I could live my life as long as I was discreet."

Hernando looked at her, confused, and Ariadna knew he felt something in the story didn't quite add up, but he couldn't pinpoint what.

"And why are you telling me this now? Why did you wait a week?"

Ariadna stood up from the desk and walked until she was right in front of him, so close that Hernando could smell her perfume, different from the one she wore to work, more intimate.

"Because I was afraid," she said, her voice dropping to a whisper. "Afraid of what it meant. Afraid to admit what I feel. But after that conversation, I realized I've spent years pretending with

Emeterio, pretending in my life, even pretending with myself. And then you show up, Hernando, with your verses and your broken heart, with that way of looking at me as if you really see me—not as property, not as a trophy, but as another person."

Ariadna took Hernando's hands in hers.

"That night, after talking to Emeterio, after he fell asleep with his usual snores, I stayed awake staring at the ceiling. And do you know who I was thinking about? About you. About how your hands tremble when you touch me, not from nerves, but from reverence. About how you read my silences better than anyone reads my words."

"Ariadna…"

"Do you hear me?" she insisted. "I got out of bed and went to the window. I saw the city lights stretching to the horizon and thought that somewhere out there you'd be awake too, maybe writing verses, maybe thinking about Nancy, or about me, or about no one in particular."

Tears began to roll down Ariadna's cheeks.

"And I realized we're two lonely souls who found each other briefly in the dark, who gave each other mutual comfort. But I don't want it to be just that anymore, Hernando. I don't want to go back to my separate life, a little more broken, a little wiser, but fundamentally unchanged."

"What are you saying?"

"That I love you," Ariadna confessed, and as she said it she felt as though a weight of years was lifting from her shoulders. "I love you with an intensity that scares me. I love you in a way I thought I was no longer capable of loving. In you I see a forbidden passion, yes, but I also see hope. I see a rebellion against my stagnant life, yes, but I also see a chance to be myself."

Hernando sat motionless, processing her words.

"I've waited a week to tell you because I was terrified," she went on. "Terrified you'd reject me, terrified of the consequences, terrified to admit that I want more. But that conversation with Emeterio taught me something: that we all wear masks, that we all hide truths, that we all pretend to be something we're not. And I'm tired of pretending."

She knelt in front of him, still holding his hands.

"I'm not asking you to leave everything for me, or for eternal promises. Just that we don't end this yet. That we keep meeting here in this office, in that café in the forbidden neighborhood, wherever. That you give me more of those moments of light amid the everyday darkness."

"But Emeterio…"

"Emeterio has his own secrets," Ariadna said. "His own taboos. And he's given me permission, in his way, to have mine. As long as we're discreet, as long as there's no scandal, he'll stay in his world and I in mine."

"And in six years?"

"I'll be free," Ariadna said. "But I don't want to wait six years to feel alive. I don't want to wait six years to experience real love."

She stood up and leaned toward him, her lips inches from his.

"Tell me you feel the same, Hernando. Tell me I'm not the only one who thinks about this day and night. Tell me that when you touch me, you also feel the world stop."

Hernando closed his eyes, sensing the weight of her words, the implicit danger, the promise of something greater than them both.

"I've thought about it too," he finally admitted. "Every night. Every morning. When I draw plans, when I read, when I try to sleep. You're in every thought."

Ariadna smiled, the first genuine smile Hernando had seen on her face in weeks.

"Then let's not end this," she whispered. "Let's be survivors together. Not heroes or villains. Just two people trying to find moments of light."

And when their lips finally met, it was different from all their previous kisses. There was no urgency, no guilt. Only truth—raw, terrifying, and beautiful.

In the office overlooking Las Palmas Park, while the city woke around them, two broken souls decided to go on breaking together, because at least like that, in the shards, they found something resembling freedom.

And Ariadna, with her lips still damp and her heart pounding, kept her terrible secret: that Emeterio had not given her permission

but a threat. That every kiss with Hernando was also a potential death sentence for him.

But in that moment, with the taste of her architect on her lips and the promise of more meetings on the horizon, she decided that some secrets were worth keeping. That some pious lies protected what mattered most.

That love, sometimes, required as much courage as betrayal.

"Love?" Hernando asked mockingly, pulling her out of her reverie.

"Maybe," Ariadna replied, hardening her features. "It's no laughing matter."

Hernando put the bottle away in his desk.

"I still haven't gotten over Nancy leaving," he excused himself. "I don't think it's a good idea. Think about…"

"Don't leave that present lying around," Ariadna cut in. "It could cost you your job."

"I don't know what to say," Hernando nodded, putting the bottle in his briefcase. "You're a married woman and…"

"I'd like to invite you to dinner tomorrow night, Friday."

A thunderclap announced another storm. Hernando looked toward the window, where clouds were gathering menacingly over the park. He then remembered his reading of Cirlot, that passage about the storm as a symbol of imminent conflict, of passions about to break loose uncontrollably. A storm, he thought, does not only herald rain: it presages the breaking of the established order, the transgression of boundaries, the price paid for what is forbidden. And at that moment, staring into Ariadna's imploring eyes, he knew he was standing on the edge of a precipice where opposing forces would inevitably collide. Emeterio's veiled threat echoed in his mind like the thunder he had just heard: an imminent mess from which he might not emerge unscathed.

"Thank you," Hernando replied, still shaken by the omen, "but I have another commitment."

"Commitment?" Ariadna asked, her eyes burning with jealousy.

"Yes…" Hernando answered defiantly. "I need to meet other women. Wasn't that your advice?"

"Have you never had relationships just for sex?"

"Of course I have. I just don't want to hurt you."

"You won't."

"Then let's be *amorous*."

"Amorous?"

Hernando got up from his chair and walked to the window, watching the clouds continue to gather. When he spoke, his voice took on a softer, almost poetic tone.

"That's what Jaime Sabines calls people like you and me in a poem—those of us who live free and without commitments," he explained, turning to look at her. "The amorous ones, he says. Those who give themselves to the moment knowing it can be fleeting. Those who love intensely but without possession, without eternal promises or bonds."

Ariadna approached him, captivated by his words.

"Those who meet in the dark and give each other mutual light, even if just for a moment," Hernando continued. "Those who don't ask for explanations or give accounts. The free ones, the passing ones, the ones who burn without asking permission."

Sabines, with his carnal, desperate love, was for Hernando a mirror of his own vulnerability, a way of naming the unnamable.

"I want you to recite it to me in full," Ariadna whispered, "but not now—when we're nearing ecstasy."

"If we make love, it'll be a flame that grows and goes out."

"I'm not afraid of taking risks."

"I don't know… Until a few days ago I thought dying of love would be beautiful."

"And Saturday?" Ariadna insisted, not daring to challenge his objections. "My daughters have piano lessons until noon. We could sunbathe by the pool."

Hernando smiled, intimidated by lascivious thoughts. He looked out his window, where heavy gray clouds were gliding over the Bucaramanga plateau, hiding the reddish rays from Palonegro, a landscape that evoked historic battles and personal defeats. Another thunderclap rumbled in the distance, louder this time, and Hernando sensed that the storm, beyond being meteorological, would become existential. The forces were already in motion, passions unleashed, the order about to break. And he, an architect

of solid structures, found himself building on quicksand, knowing that what was coming would violently transform him—perhaps destroy him—yet unable to resist the pull of that chaotic fertility that promised something new could be born among the rubble of their lives.

The storm had arrived. And he, a devoted reader of Cirlot's dictionary of symbols, understood perfectly what that meant.

Toward sunset the next day, Hernando's gloved hands pulled a baking dish of roasted *papa criolla* from the oven; he was playing chef, the opposite of his old courtships in the city's most renowned restaurants, carefully preparing a roast beef for Marianne. He carried it to the dining room, where his would-be beloved waited, smiling.

"Do you live alone?"

"Yes," he nodded, setting his dish on a round blue porcelain trivet, "for a month now."

"Only a month?"

"One morning I woke up and didn't find my partner beside me. That's life. The day will also come when we won't wake up at all, and I wonder—who else is moved like we are by this sun, by these sunsets? Surely someone like me. Maybe I'll be that someone too. Maybe the poets I've admired so much tremble and pulse with me in my lovesick woes?"

"You're very metaphysical."

"You say that because you are too."

Marianne nodded in a gesture of solidarity. Hernando offered her something to drink, and she accepted a gin and tonic. He, for his part, poured himself a passion-fruit juice with water.

"Everything happens for a reason we don't want to understand," Hernando added. "It's no coincidence, for example, that you and I are alive, talking alone, or that we go on existing, second by second, in a body exposed to deterioration and disease. Time, decay, destiny—they're a symphony where every note is as necessary as it is inevitable."

"Ah," Marianne nodded. "So you're one of those who believe in God?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's a question, although from your reaction I see it should have been a statement."

"Do you believe in anything?"

"Of course," Marianne replied, perplexed. "Of course."

"In what?"

"In this table, for example."

Hernando patted the table firmly.

"You don't need to *believe* in it; it's right there, isn't it? Do you believe in anything insubstantial? Something immaterial?"

"I'm not sure…"

"Do you believe in love, for example?"

"Of course—how could I not? We all believe in it."

"All of us? Keep in mind no one has ever proven the existence of love."

Marianne nodded at Hernando's reasoning.

"It's not necessary," she replied. "It's something you feel."

"Except for those who've never loved."

"Are there such beings?"

"Are there criminals?"

Marianne laughed as she nodded.

"It's the same with God," Hernando said, laughing.

"But I've never felt God," Marianne objected.

"Because you haven't recognized God in love."

Hernando understood love as theophany, the source of creativity and ideas.

Marianne finished her wine with a skeptical gesture.

"I meant the God of the churches," she said. "The God that is the opium of the people."

"Oh, that one. Yes, of course, the God of the masses… Even so, isn't he preferable to opium itself?"

Marianne took her purse and pulled out a pack of cigarettes.

"Do you smoke?" she asked.

"No."

"Oh!" she exclaimed with feigned surprise. "May I?"

Hernando weighed the consequences of his sincerity. If he said no, he would drive her away at once.

"Of course. I don't mind smoking a little with you."

They both laughed for a few moments.

"Strange way of being polite," Marianne said, lighting a cigarette. "Let's keep philosophizing, Hernando."

"Those who have lost that primal connection with creation, who can no longer see the magic in a breeze, a sunset, or even an illness, need a father to control them, whether that's religion or the state. And, back to what I said before, that's why drug addicts—or, as Marx called them, opium-eaters—multiply in societies without law or religion."

"Have you tried drugs?" Marianne asked accusingly.

"Someone who doesn't try drugs is like someone who stays a virgin out of fear that sex might hurt."

"I don't really agree."

"Your bourgeois upbringing keeps you from defying the creed the French authorities preach the most. But so we don't get into Byzantine arguments, remember that any painkiller or tranquilizer turns its patient into a drug addict—just one approved by science."

Marianne nodded slowly.

"That makes sense. Now, about your faith in God. As a Frenchwoman it's hard for me to accept what you say, Hernando. By law we're educated without studying religions."

French laicism, with its Revolution and its separation of church and state, was a cultural conflict Marianne carried as baggage.

"Maybe that's why you've never reflected on them," he said.

"France was the first secular republic and…"

The phone rang. Hernando got up and answered.

"Hello?…"

His face went pale.

"Hi, Nancy. Yes. No! I'm having dinner. I have guests. Just my music-appreciation teacher… You don't know her… Don't worry… Later, yes… I'll find it now!"

Hernando nodded and set the receiver down on the small table next to the keyboard before heading to his bedroom.

"I won't be long," he whispered to Marianne apologetically.

Marianne drew on her cigarette impatiently, leaving her napkin on the table.

Hernando returned with a notebook and pen in his hands; he

picked up the receiver again.

"How is it?…" he asked.

Hernando jotted down a few lines in his notebook.

"Got it," he said. "We'll talk. Take care… Bye."

Marianne watched him return to the table with a thoughtful look.

"You'll have to forgive me. I was talking to an old friend; actually, I think she was one of your students a few months ago, before she graduated. Her name is Nancy, Nancy Barrios."

"I don't remember her," Marianne apologized. "I only remember my most outstanding students."

"It's true she never shone in her studies," Hernando nodded. "She used to buy her university papers from the print shops around campus. Isn't that a disgrace? All those universities allow businesses to advertise essays at five thousand pesos a page and theses at two million pesos. That academic shamelessness is the seed of a corrupt society, where merit is an illusion."

"That's why bridges and buildings collapse in Colombia," Marianne concluded. "Judges let the guilty go free and convict the employee who signs the contracts; managers run companies into the ground, and journalists sell themselves to the highest bidder. That indulgence toward university laziness has a social cost that will take decades to repair. That's why Papini wondered in the fifties, 'What has Latin America contributed to humanity?' Failing to find anything valuable, he concluded that this continent, like Africa, is a parasite on humanity."

Hernando recalled Gibbon's verdict on hot countries: effeminate and condemned to vanity and lust, a historical reflection that encompassed much of Colombia—the exuberant climate fostering passion and cunning over the discipline and honesty of a few.

"You should be more understanding," Hernando objected. "Colombia is one of the most untamed countries in the world, with scorching heat in the plains and on the coast, poisonous jungles, and three mountain ranges thick with vegetation, nests of vermin and beasts, with hills sliced by abysses and moorlands that freeze the blood. Bandits have always found refuge in our caves and

deserts, and until civilization reaches all our nooks and canyons, we won't have the necessary prosperity and the leisure indispensable for dreaming up new inventions and enterprises."

"Maybe you're right," Marianne conceded. "Let's give Colombia another century."

"Speaking of your past with Riakola…"

Marianne finished her wine.

Hernando followed suit.

"His thug friends accuse me of being egocentric for ignoring him. And to be frank, I take that as a compliment."

"They say he traffics cocaine through several respectable companies."

"Isn't it obvious?"

"What was the reason? I mean, for you to be his girlfriend."

Marianne shrugged, uncomfortable at having to justify her behavior to someone she'd just met.

"Besides playing the violin, I'm an artist—undeniably narcissistic. I even have a self-portrait of myself in my living room. It's a meter and a half tall. One day Riakola came in with his gang; they saw the canvas and drew their own conclusions. Don't take it the wrong way; I also paint landscapes and still lifes… The self-portrait was my feminist statement, a challenge to local machismo."

"Da Vinci," Hernando nodded, "Rembrandt, Van Gogh—they all had self-portraits. And anyway, doesn't everyone see themselves in a mirror every morning?"

Marianne poured two more glasses.

"None of them painted themselves nude, as far as we know."

"Oh," Hernando replied, his pupils widening.

"Riakola fell in love with that self-portrait, and even though it wasn't for sale and I didn't consider it very valuable, he offered me a blank check for it."

"So he bought you?"

"I paid off all my debts and bought a new car. Then I felt obligated to accept his invitations and wanted to understand his world, as any woman does when she meets a man willing to sacrifice everything for her. In the end I was disappointed: a man

enslaved by the deadly sins, as all mafiosi must be. Otherwise they wouldn't sacrifice themselves to accumulate wealth they immediately squander, always afraid of running into death on their way home."

Hernando put on a CD that played the jazz tunes from *Hopscotch*.

"Riakola is a sequel to our colonial centuries," Hernando agreed. "They were taught they were a racial anomaly: creoles or mestizos, inferior beings who never should have been born. And in the end they believed the lie that they were marginal. Until easy money gave them back their place in the world. What greater achievement for a mafioso than conquering a European woman, then? Now you'll understand why guerrilla and paramilitary leaders send their sons and daughters to study at the world's most prestigious universities."

"They don't do it for love of the arts," Marianne nodded.

6. *The subversives*

Under cover of night, when Bucaramanga folded itself into its steep streets and the evening air carried the scent of damp earth and freshly ground coffee down from the hills, Pedro—known as El Calvo—and Juan—known as El Tuerto—kept watch from the back seat of a 2006 Chevrolet Captiva parked three blocks below the building.

Both men were heavyset and dressed like rivals. Juan wore a sky-blue linen suit more suited to a tropical wedding than a night stakeout. Pedro looked like the jester he had chosen to become: a yellow shirt that caught every eye, a lilac tie that made you think of anything but church, and a pink suit that hinted at the flamboyant secrets he'd picked up during his sybaritic years in Paris, where he had worked as an illegal immigrant dealing cards in casinos.

Both were sweating buckets while peering through digital binoculars at Hernando's terrace. Up there, silhouetted against the orange glow of the garden lamps, Marianne and Hernando moved with the deliberate slowness of people savoring every second of an intimate conversation.

When Marianne leaned in and kissed Hernando on the cheek—a gesture that from this distance looked longer than it probably was—Pedro let out a guttural growl.

"Son of a bitch!" he snarled, his ruddy cheeks flaring from salmon-pink to ripe-tomato red.

With thick but surprisingly nimble fingers, he dialed a number on his cell. The screen lit his sweaty face as he waited.

"Don't get upset, Riakola," he said cautiously, the way a patriarch announces the death of a distant relative, "but you need to hear this."

Beside him, Juan El Tuerto kept his vigil, unshaken. His good eye—the left one, the color of strong coffee—tracked every movement on the terrace with a hunter's focus. The missing right

eye had three different origin stories that Juan doled out strategically depending on the audience and his mood. Three versions of the same loss, three truths that contradicted one another with the calm of a man who knows nobody will press too hard.

The most popular version—the one that circulated in dive bars and street corners where old militants gathered—was also the noblest: Juan had lost his right eye in a protest organized by the underworld against the government. A chaotic march that mixed legitimate grievances with darker interests, where students marched shoulder-to-shoulder with hired killers in plain clothes. Some said a badly thrown tear-gas canister; others insisted a police bullet. Either way, Juan ended up one-eyed and, in certain circles, an accidental hero of the people's resistance.

That version opened doors where a common hitman would have been turned away. It gave him a veneer of legitimacy, a narrative of sacrifice he never bothered to correct when it suited him.

But on long nights, when the aguardiente flowed and the company was trusted—or drunk enough to forget what they'd heard—Juan told a colder, more precise story that rang truer to anyone who knew the trade.

Panama, 2001. Li Wei, a Chinese banker, was laundering money for the Colombian cartels through shell companies in Colón and Panama City. The contract came the way they always did: a call from a public phone, a short conversation that said nothing and everything, a discreet meeting in a seafood restaurant in Casco Viejo, and a briefcase with half the payment up front.

Li Wei was careful with his movements but loyal to certain private routines. Every morning at exactly six, he swam in the pool at the Hotel El Panamá, when the light was just beginning to gild the concrete and the water still held the chill of dawn.

Juan watched that ritual for seven days from an eighteenth-floor apartment he'd rented across from the hotel, about eight hundred meters away. He had chosen a Remington 700 with a Leupold scope: reliable, understated, no frills—the tool of a man who knew success lived in the shot, not the gear.

During the wait, Juan felt in control. Recon had been straightforward; patterns clear; surroundings predictable. And that sense of predictability—that little mental breather—was usually the beginning of disaster in this line of work. You get used to thinking you've figured the field, and when that happens, the body relaxes, attention drops half a degree, and danger slips through the crack.

When the moment came, Li Wei surfaced, shook the water from his hair, unaware of anything but the morning ahead. Juan breathed, lined up the crosshairs, and fired. The round entered the right temple: clean, dry, final.

But in that microsecond of impact, Juan allowed himself something he shouldn't have: satisfaction. That tiny, almost imperceptible slack was enough for the recoil to catch him with his shoulders not quite braced. The scope, too close to his face, whipped back and smashed into his right eye. He felt something burst—something hot, liquid, thick—like his vision had turned into a red shadow spilling toward his nose.

After Panama, Juan returned to Bogotá with a makeshift patch still damp and the smell of pool chlorine stuck in his nose. He had collected fifty thousand dollars in cash with a calm he didn't feel, counting every bill to anchor himself to the simplest, most brutal truth that kept him breathing: staying alive was enough. The difference between the dead man and the one still walking was sometimes no thicker than an eyelid. Losing the eye wasn't tragedy. Stopping breathing would have been.

But that wasn't the whole truth. There was one more version—the real one—that Juan only told when the question came from someone who understood silence.

It hadn't been the rifle's recoil. It had been punishment. A botched job in Arauca, a shipment that was supposed to cross and didn't, and an ELN commander who had once been a priest: a gaunt Spaniard with patient eyes who still clasped his hands when he spoke. That man spared Juan's life but told him he wouldn't walk away unscathed.

"Among the Chinese I learned something," the priest said while Juan was held against a rough-plaster table in a bahareque house.

"The greatest gift a man can receive is detachment. What you call loss, if you cling to it, owns you. Accept it, and it perfects what remains. That banker you killed was my best friend, Li Wei. Now he'll be your teacher, whether you like it or not. Thank him."

The eye was gone forever. What remained was a new way of seeing. And that new way of seeing carried him through the years that followed: Miami 2002—a Cuban distributor on South Beach, taken from a half-built high-rise facing the ocean; Caracas 2003—a general whose name is never spoken because some names still breathe; Cali 2004—a prosecutor who knew too much in a city where truth always has a price; Bogotá, Chapinero—a politician who needed to vanish so others could breathe.

Every job completed after losing the eye proved the priest—and maybe Li Wei—right: when you no longer fear loss, your hand doesn't shake.

Eventually the Schwerter family hired him as an advisor.

Juan moved—with his boss's blessing—between the ELN, the paramilitaries, and the Americans the way someone crosses a river on visible stones. He sold routes, bought information, resold it to the highest bidder—not for personal ambition, but to confuse the enemies of the Schwerter clan, to whom he had sworn loyalty in the same Santería rituals that had once guaranteed Fidel a long, if agonizing, life.

The missing eye never made him less accurate. On the contrary: it forced him to calculate angles, distances, shadows, and wind with an attention born only from pain well absorbed. Geometry replaced instinct. Discipline replaced pride.

And that was how he sat now, in the front seat of a Chevrolet Captiva, linen suit soaked through, binoculars pressed to his single eye. He watched Hernando and Marianne talking outside a café. No hurry. Every ending has its own rhythm. Even a small, careless kiss on the cheek can be the beginning of something that, sooner or later, will have to be paid for.

Juan knew that. He had learned to look at the world sideways. And for him, looking was surviving.

Up on the terrace, unaware of the eyes watching from the dark street, Marianne and Hernando raised their glasses.

"Cheers!" Marianne exclaimed, lifting her glass of red wine; the crystal caught the lamplight like liquid ruby.

The glasses clinked in the quiet Bucaramanga night—a delicate sound that stood in stark contrast to the tension hanging in the air like electricity before a storm.

"Maybe I should talk to each of them," Marianne said, meaning Riakola's men who were surely watching her every move. "Explain that this isn't what it looks like."

Hernando lit a cigarette with a silver lighter—a gesture Marianne was starting to recognize as his way of buying time before saying something uncomfortable.

"People only learn up to a certain age," he replied, exhaling a blue cloud that dissolved quickly in the night breeze. "After that they mature into stubborn mules who won't change their minds even when the evidence is screaming in their face."

He paused, studying the glowing tip of his cigarette as if it held some metaphysical revelation.

"Do you know the story of the Pope who died of rage after he was captured?"

Marianne glanced at the moon drifting behind slow-moving clouds. It was a waning moon, just a thin crescent in the dark sky.

"I'd love to hear your version," she said with genuine curiosity. "The papal fury of Boniface VIII."

Hernando took another drag before beginning, slipping into that storyteller tone Marianne had come to enjoy.

"Charles II of Anjou was King of Naples at the end of the thirteenth century," Hernando began, "and the pope was Boniface VIII—his rival—one of the most arrogant and hot-tempered pontiffs the Catholic Church ever produced."

Marianne settled back in her chair, anticipating one of those historical digressions academics turn into moral parables.

"Boniface VIII was convinced papal power stood above any king or emperor," Hernando continued. "In 1302 he published the bull *Unam Sanctam*, basically declaring that every human being had to submit to the pope to be saved. Imagine the arrogance—he thought he could depose kings with a snap of his fingers."

"And Charles of Anjou captured him?" Marianne asked.

"Not directly. It was more complicated, the way these quarrels always are when pride gets mixed up with politics. Boniface's real enemy was King Philip IV of France—Philip the Fair—who refused to let the pope stick his nose in royal finances. Charles II of Anjou was caught in the middle, playing both sides as it suited him."

Hernando paused for dramatic effect, clearly enjoying the suspense.

"In 1303, a French noble named Guillaume de Nogaret—sent by Philip—staged a daring coup. With a band of mercenaries and the support of the Colonna family—sworn enemies of the pope—they stormed the papal palace in Anagni, where Boniface had taken refuge. They found him dressed in full papal regalia, sitting on his throne, defiant to the end."

"Did they kill him?" Marianne asked.

"No need. The official story says Nogaret slapped him. Some more colorful chroniclers claim it was with a steel gauntlet. More cautious ones just mention terrible insults and verbal humiliation. Either way, they kept the pope prisoner for three days until the people of Anagni had enough of the French and drove them out."

"And the rage?"

"That's the interesting part," Hernando said, warming to the tale. "Boniface was freed, but he never recovered from the humiliation. A pope—the vicar of Christ on earth, by his own doctrine—slapped and imprisoned like a common criminal. He returned to Rome but fell into a kind of frenzy. Contemporary chroniclers wrote of 'rage that gnawed at his insides.' Some say he banged his head against the walls. Others that he couldn't sleep or eat, consumed by hatred for his enemies."

Hernando tapped his cigarette into a crystal ashtray.

"He died a month after the incident in Anagni. Officially, old age and accumulated stress. But Dante Alighieri, who hated him passionately, wrote in the *Divine Comedy* that Boniface had been 'crucified' in life by his pride and that his death was the direct result of his uncontrollable rage. A death caused by refusing to accept that power—even papal power—has limits."

Marianne thought about the story while the night breeze gently

stirred the treetops nearby.

"And the moral?" she asked. "That Riakola and his men are like Boniface VIII?"

"All lawless violent men behave the same way," Hernando answered with a sad smile. "They believe their power is absolute, that they can control every situation, every person. And when they discover they can't—when they come up against something they can't dominate—the rage eats them alive. You can't reason with people like that, Marianne. You can only wait for history to do its work and devour them, the way it devoured the arrogant pope."

"And us?" Marianne asked. "What role do we play in this story?"

Hernando lit another cigarette, considering the question.

"We're footnotes," he said finally. "The Greek chorus watching the excesses of those who choose the frenzy of hate and pride. Observers who, like Dante, live to tell their story. The salt of the earth that survives between Scylla and Charybdis—the monsters that embody men who, even in the twenty-first century, don't hesitate to kill the moment they get the chance."

"That reduces us to being their victims."

"You could say that," Hernando continued, his eyes gleaming the way they did when he was about to say something provocative. "But history shows that those who refuse to answer aggression have chance on their side."

"Plenty of kids die in shootouts," Marianne countered.

"My theory—and I admit it's pure speculation, but based on the eloquent silences in the sources—is that innocents don't enter that equation. You have to renounce the power of revenge, of hatred, of resentment. There's a long tradition of heroes who defeated armies through pacifism—like the American soldier in the war against Japan who refused to kill and whom bullets never touched."

"Well—"

"Plutarch says it too," Hernando went on: "'The brave man is not the one who defeats the enemy, but the one who conquers himself.' And Montaigne repeats centuries later: true victory is mastering one's own nature. Violent men think they win because

they impose their will, but in reality they're slaves to their fury. They don't see that anger is just a brief madness."

"And that protects us?" Marianne asked.

"Not always," Hernando admitted. "But when you don't hate, you have nothing to lose. And the man who has nothing to lose is impossible to control. That's why we fascinate and terrify the violent at the same time. Their power depends on our reaction. If we don't react, they break."

Marianne fell silent, processing the story and its implications.

"Do you think I still love Riakola?" she asked at last.

"You're very attractive."

"I could hurt you, Hernando."

"There are men whose entire identity is built on a lie they themselves believe," Hernando replied, ignoring her warning. "You can't reason with them because reasoning would mean destroying that identity. They prefer violence, chaos, even their own destruction, over facing the truth about who they really are."

Down in the Chevrolet Captiva, Juan El Tuerto lowered his binoculars for a moment and rubbed his tired eye.

Pedro was still on the phone; his voice a mix of pleading and warning. Juan watched him drum the dashboard with a sinister rhythm.

Pedro had also been a croupier—in a casino in Cúcuta—where he got his baptism by fire in the 1999 robbery of the Banco Agrario in Girón.

Five men had gone in on a job that made the papers and turned them into celebrities: Pedro, Tuerto Hernández, Gordo Linares, Flaco Barrios from Zapatoca, and a systems engineer who hacked the cameras. They entered at 3:07 a.m. with hydraulic shears, oxy-acetylene torches, homemade smoke grenades made from potassium chlorate. The night guard—don Euclides, sixty years old, asleep in his chair—opened his eyes. They tied his hands with duct tape.

"Old man, don't play hero. This is just money."

But the old man pulled a rusty revolver from under the desk. Pedro shot him in the leg with a .38. Mistake. The alarm went off like a rabid dog. Police arrived in four minutes and thirty-two

seconds. They got out with 200 million pesos in 50,000-peso bills stuffed into canvas bags that weighed like bricks.

Flaco took bullets in the back and collapsed on the sidewalk. Gordo tried to help him and was caught on Carrera 27, screaming names he shouldn't have. Pedro escaped across the rooftops, jumped onto a passing beer truck, burned his clothes in a dumpster in Lebrija, and shaved his head with a knife to destroy DNA evidence. Ever since, they called him "El Calvo"—Baldy.

Night stretched over Bucaramanga like a blanket too thin to cover all the secrets fermenting in its streets.

"Few men in Bucaramanga know how to cook," Marianne said suddenly, changing the subject with her usual gift for abrupt transitions.

Hernando smiled, grateful for the end of her hostility toward his independent views on metaphysics, history, and philosophy.

"How did you become one of them?"

"Let's just say I know enough not to poison my guests," Hernando answered with mock modesty. "You came to find out, didn't you?"

In the darkness of the street, Juan El Tuerto raised his binoculars again. He watched Hernando and Marianne stand from their chairs and go inside the apartment, leaving the terrace empty except for two half-finished glasses of wine reflecting the light of the waning moon.

Bucaramanga was about to get a lot more complicated before dawn.

Pedro hung up.

"Riakola wants us to follow them if they leave," he said.

Juan nodded, his good eye fixed on the lit window of Hernando's apartment.

"He always wants us following someone," he muttered. "Like it changes anything."

The amber glow of a reading lamp bathed the living room while Marianne scanned the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves lining the walls of Hernando's apartment. The complete works of Aguilar stood like soldiers in dark-green spines, interspersed with editions in French, English, and German. Kafka in the original German sat

beside Faulkner and Sartre. Greek classics peeked out among modern Latin Americans.

On the dining table, two plates held the remains of mushroom-and-asparagus risotto, lit by the candles Hernando had lit. The red-wine glasses—Italian Barolo—left purple rings on the varnished wood.

"Few men in Bucaramanga know how to cook," Marianne remarked, delicately dabbing her lips with a linen napkin.

"I won't deny it," Hernando agreed, pleased, as he carried the plates to the kitchen. Above his head, one of his own oil paintings—an abstract landscape in blues and ochres—watched the scene.

"This is still a matriarchal society."

"Matriarchal?" Marianne shot back. "You mean patriarchal."

Hernando returned with a tray of French cheeses and sat across from her. Through the open window, the night breeze made the white and purple lilies in the window box sway—European varieties that had cost him a fortune to source—and farther off, the lit terraces of the building across Calle 45 showed silhouettes moving behind curtains.

"One goes hand in hand with the other," Hernando admitted, cutting a piece of Camembert. "You can't have patriarchy without matriarchy and vice versa. It happens in every power relationship. The servant is as dominant—or more so—than the master."

He stood and walked to one of the shelves, fingers sliding along the spines until he stopped at a thick, leather-bound volume. He pulled out Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in Spanish translation.

"Do you know Hegel's master-slave dialectic?" he asked, returning to the table with the book. "It's fascinating. The master depends on the slave's recognition to know he is the master. Without the slave, the master doesn't exist. But the slave, by working, by transforming the world, develops a self-consciousness the master never achieves because he only consumes what the slave produces."

He opened the book to a marked page, where blue-ink underlining betrayed earlier readings.

"The slave becomes freer than the master," Hernando

continued, "because he masters nature, creates, transforms. The master becomes a slave to his own dependency. It's a symbiotic, even parasitic relationship. Each needs the other to exist. That's why I say you can't have patriarchy without matriarchy."

"So," Marianne leaned forward, eyes gleaming with intellectual interest, "you're suggesting the whole quest for equality is an illusion?"

"Not an illusion," Hernando closed the book and set it on the table, "but a misunderstanding of human nature. Hegel shows us that consciousness is built through conflict, through dialectical tension. A world of absolute equals would be a world without tension, without becoming, without history. It would be the death of the spirit."

He poured himself more wine, the dark-red liquid glowing under the amber light.

"At a university," he went on, "isn't a famous professor superior to an unknown dean?"

"In this country," Marianne hesitated, watching the candlelight dance across the book spines, "never."

"Exactly. Here, like in Asia, political office is valued more than knowledge. That's why we elect charlatans to govern us! It's not about who has greater merit, but who can play the biggest fool. We're still governed by the priests of the Sanhedrin."

"But Hegel," Marianne objected, taking a sip of wine, "also talks about synthesis, about overcoming that dialectic."

"Yes," Hernando conceded, "but synthesis is never equality—it's a new form of hierarchical relationship. History moves in spirals, not straight lines toward egalitarian utopia. Every synthesis generates its own antithesis, its own conflict. It never ends."

Hernando refilled Marianne's glass.

"That's why absolute egalitarian revolutionary ideals always end in new tyrannies," he added. "Because they ignore this fundamental Hegelian truth: human consciousness is defined by difference, by recognizing the other as different, not as equal."

"What a pessimistic view," Marianne murmured.

"Or realistic," Hernando smiled. "After all, isn't it more honest to acknowledge inevitable hierarchies and work to make them as

just as possible, instead of chasing a chimerical equality that only breeds hypocrisy?"

"She still wants you," Marianne said abruptly, changing the subject again, "doesn't she?"

"No," Hernando hesitated, setting the book aside, "but…"

"But…?"

"I'm worried about her."

"And isn't worrying about someone a form of love?"

"It depends."

"What did she say?" Marianne asked, noticing the confusion on Hernando's candle-lit face. "If you can tell me."

"She talked about Medellín; says it's a nice city."

"Any city can be."

"She sounded upset."

"Obviously jealous."

"Maybe," Hernando smiled, his gaze drifting to the window where the lilies swayed gently. "Nancy always wanted to know everything."

He caught Marianne's skeptical smile, framed by the shadows of the thousands of volumes around them, and wondered if he was being indiscreet.

"Anyway," he added, straightening up, "I realized I don't love her anymore. For the first time in six weeks, I feel free."

Marianne shrugged, taking a piece of blue cheese from the tray.

"You know what I think?" she asked.

"Yes?"

"That you two will get back together."

Hernando drank from his glass, set it down beside the Hegel, and smiled at Marianne.

"Never."

Hernando's phone rang, shattering the contemplative silence. The sound echoed off the book-lined walls.

"Hello…?" he answered, then heard only a dial tone. "They hung up."

"It's your beloved checking on you," Marianne said, crossing her legs.

"I don't recognize that number."

"I should go," she said, checking her watch and standing. The candlelight deepened the shadows under her cheekbones.

Minutes later, behind the wheel, Hernando parked in front of the stone-paved passage-park that led to the Coloso de Piedra building in Altos de Cabecera. It was a distinctive feature of Bucaramanga urbanism: a wide staircase of carved stone flanked by planters full of heliconias and bird-of-paradise flowers, lit by colonial-style lanterns that cast yellow circles on the worn steps.

At this hour, the passage came alive in its own way. In the branches of the rubber trees and yarumos lining the stairs, blackbirds and thrushes settled in to sleep, giving occasional chirps—their last conversations before night silence. A late hummingbird still darted among the red flowers of a cayenne bush. A mockingbird's song echoed from somewhere unseen, mingling with the distant hum of traffic on the avenue.

Leaves rustled in the breeze rising from the canyon, carrying the damp scent of vegetation and the cool Santander night air. A few windows in the Coloso de Piedra glowed like curious eyes watching the passage.

"Thanks, Hernando," Marianne said, not yet moving to leave the car. "I've had an unforgettable evening."

"Sorry about that call."

"C'est la vie!" Marianne declared.

"I should have kept it shorter."

"It doesn't matter," she forgave him. "Besides, you're not a rude man."

"Compared to Riakola…"

Marianne gestured awkwardly, looking toward the stairs where a pair of doves cooed softly on one of the lanterns.

"I know."

"How did it even happen? I still can't figure it out."

A thrush let out a sharp trill from the upper branches, as if commenting on the conversation.

"Right from the start I knew it wouldn't last two weeks. Remember we don't just live life—we often experiment with it. At least that's my philosophy."

"I don't want to experiment much."

"I respect that," Marianne shot back. "Riakola is a man who suffers from excess masculinity. He won't leave me alone. I got a restraining order; he can't come within thirty meters."

"You should have called the police, then."

"Not in these times of peace."

"What are you implying?"

"Is it true your friend works for the mafia?"

"I neither know nor care," Hernando sighed, taking in the panorama of Bucaramanga spread out before them, lights winding up the hills. "Besides, that guy was never my friend."

Hernando sat upright, hands still on the wheel. Marianne met his eyes under the dim dashboard light. Up in the treetops, the birds were quieting, their songs fading to sleepy murmurs.

"Au revoir…"

"I hope we see each other soon."

Marianne kissed his cheek, leaving the faintest trace of jasmine perfume mixed with the lingering scent of red wine. She got out and started up the stone steps, her silhouette outlined against the lantern light. A mockingbird sang one last nighttime melody as she disappeared among the shadows of the yarumos, heading for her building.

Hernando watched her go, the birdsong ringing in his ears like a natural, organic farewell—more honest than any human words.

From the alley leading to the stairs that descend from Altos de Cabecera into the city, Riakola, Pedro, and Juan watched Marianne lean over Hernando.

"Son of a—son of a—son of a—bitch!" Riakola exploded, rage mounting.

Riakola opened his trunk and pulled out a baseball bat.

As he started toward Hernando's car, Pedro and Juan stopped him.

"Not now," Pedro said. "There are cameras, and this building is right across from the police colonel's penthouse."

"Comrade," Juan said calmly, "we'll fix it later."

Riakola snorted with hatred, heart pounding.

Marianne got out and entered her building. Hernando started his car and drove past, smiling. They heard the opening bars of

Sinatra's *My Way*: *To think I did all that, and may I say not in a shy way… I did it my way*.

Back home, Hernando went to his room, undressed, brushed his teeth, and lay down. He had barely fallen asleep when his phone rang insistently.

"Hello…?" he mumbled, picking up.

"Hernando," Nancy said cheerfully.

"Nancy!" Hernando exclaimed. "Are you okay? What time is it?"

He checked his cell: four in the morning.

"I can't sleep," Nancy said, voice breaking. "I've been thinking about us."

"What?"

"Maybe you could come live with me in Medellín after all," her voice anguished. "Not now—in six months."

"Are you serious?" Hernando realized his former lover wanted him back.

"In the meantime you could visit," Nancy said, voice trembling. "We could spend a weekend together."

Hernando no longer recognized in Nancy the lover who had once mocked his pain.

"You're high," he told her.

"I'm serious," Nancy sobbed.

Hernando sighed impatiently, hung up, and went back to sleep, thinking his love had indeed been masochistic; he had adored Nancy for the humiliations of the past. Now that she was submitting to his will, he felt only growing contempt.

The phone rang again.

"No way…" he muttered.

He picked up.

"Let me hear your voice!"

He heard Nancy crying from afar.

"I want you to hear something," Hernando said calmly. "Call me back in five minutes."

He hung up, satisfied, knowing he was in control. He opened his laptop, found the song that echoed in his memory. Nancy called again. He greeted her warmly and let the notes and lyrics flood his

premeditated solitude. A friend had once told him poetry was dead because no poet lived off it anymore. Hernando replied that the music industry had preserved the best poetry of the twentieth century in its songs—like Aretha Franklin:

If I'd have known for just one second you'd hurt me again…

"Forgive me!" Nancy cried.

"Until eternity, my love."

Hernando unplugged the phone from the wall, turned off the light, and went to sleep.

The next morning the sun rose over the Pan de Azúcar mountains to the screech of dozens of toches, swallows, parrots, canaries, orioles, cardinals, guans, and hummingbirds.

A woman's hand opened the door to Hernando's apartment. Nancy walked naked down the hallway to his bedroom and lay down beside a burly body. They made fierce love for hours, Nancy grinding lasciviously atop a hairy man whose face was hidden beneath a sheet. As Nancy caressed his nipples, the sheet suddenly slipped, revealing Riakola's face in ecstasy.

"How's my friend Tatareto?" the body asked the man dreaming him.

Hernando woke with a start, drenched in sweat. He searched the apartment until he was sure no one was there, then sat dejectedly on the edge of his bed. After all, he was cutting out of his life one of the few women he would ever love without effort. He thought of the happiness of Muslims and of his ancestors, who lived in times when women were slaves to their lovers and husbands.

Two hours later, twenty kilometers away, Ariadna—in a silk robe—sat at a glass dining table sipping coffee. Her eyes watched a wooden wall clock: ten o'clock. She rested her head on her left hand and studied a yellow-breasted bird through the window as it darted in to peck at a fresh cake. Then the doorbell rang. She left her coffee unfinished and stood, annoyed; the bird she'd been watching flew off in fright.

A minute later Ariadna returned, followed by Hernando.

"I was expecting you at eight," she said hesitantly. "I thought you weren't coming."

"I had a bad night—nightmares."

"Have you eaten breakfast?"

"Are you alone?"

"Until two."

Hernando looked at her intently and kissed her passionately.

"It's been weeks since I made love."

Ariadna returned the kiss, long and deep. They collapsed onto the sofa. Hernando undressed without stopping kissing her. Ariadna followed suit, breathless.

Four hours later, Ariadna—wearing only a thong—dived into the turquoise water of her semi-Olympic pool. When she surfaced she gazed at the hairy chest of her new lover.

"It's not that cold," she said. "Are you coming in?"

Hernando, in red swim trunks, watched her through his whiskey glass at the pool's edge.

"Later," he excused himself. "Your daughters will be here soon."

"We could all play in the water."

"That would be unwise."

Ariadna climbed out, water streaming off her wasp waist. She grabbed a towel, turned, and showed off her perfect round buttocks.

"Sometimes I feel like you see your father in me," Hernando grumbled.

"Psychoanalysis is a worn-out formula," Ariadna said impatiently. "When will they stop scandalizing us with that business about daughters desiring their fathers and sons their mothers?"

"You rarely talk about him."

"You rarely talk about your mother."

"I visit her once a week."

"And your father?"

"Every now and then," Hernando hesitated. "But I'm not a bad son."

They heard the doorbell.

"They're here," Ariadna sighed nervously.

Ariadna walked away across the patio, hips swaying, fully aware

of Hernando's gaze. Before turning toward the exit she flashed him a flirtatious smile and ran her hands gently down the curve of her back.

Then Sofía and Camila—eleven and twelve—came in and hugged Ariadna. Elcira, their sixty-something nanny—tall, thin, gray hair in a bun, dressed from head to toe in a buttoned-up sky-blue outfit—stood behind them.

"Hi, Mommy!" Sofía exclaimed.

"Mommy!" Camila shouted.

"How was your morning, my loves?" Ariadna asked.

"We learned to play 'Für Elise.'"

"Four hands," Camila explained.

"Let me introduce my cousin Hernando," Ariadna smiled. "He works with me."

The girls hugged Hernando, who noticed Elcira's disapproving look.

"Let's go to the living room!" Ariadna ordered.

"Yes!" Camila agreed. "Come listen!"

"Me first."

"No!" Camila shot back. "Me!"

"They're charming," Hernando laughed.

"Are you an architect?" Camila asked.

"Yes," Hernando answered. "How did you know?"

"All Mommy's coworkers are."

"How clever!" Hernando nodded. "And do you know many?"

"Just Rafael, and now you."

Hernando remembered the résumé of a former employee who had quit without explanation three months before he joined Ramiro's firm.

"Hernando plays piano," Ariadna added.

"Really?" Elcira asked skeptically. "Who would've thought?"

"Just two or three pieces."

"Why don't you play something for us?" Elcira asked.

"Yes!" Sofía said. "Please play!"

"After lunch," Ariadna agreed. "But don't you want to change into something more comfortable?"

"Swimsuits?" Camila asked, mouth open. "I don't like people

seeing me like that."

"Hernando is family," Ariadna replied. "You could play with him."

"I'll change!" Sofía said, running inside.

"Me too!" Camila shouted, following her.

"You made quite an impression," Ariadna said, walking to a table by the pool. Hernando sat beside her.

"They're adorable," he said, "compared to my friends' kids."

"They're my daughters," Ariadna nodded.

"And Emeterio's," Hernando said sternly.

"What's wrong?" Ariadna took his hand. "I feel good with you. I don't want you to feel bad."

"Who's Rafael?" Hernando demanded.

"An old university classmate," Ariadna shrugged.

"Kids understand everything," Hernando said. "Did you have to lie about us being cousins?"

"You and I come from two of the oldest families in this city," Ariadna countered. "If you check, we actually are cousins."

"Don't you think they'll suspect?"

"I'm only worried about Elcira," Ariadna whispered in his ear. "I invented the cousin story because of her. She used to be a nun and tells my husband everything."

Elcira walked in just then, face stern, and spread a silk tablecloth over the table.

"Did they behave with the teacher, Elcira?" Ariadna asked.

"Sofía raised her voice to Doña Isabel twice."

"How impertinent!" Ariadna said.

"I wish the Doctor were here with us."

Ariadna forced a smile. Hernando studied the exchange of glances between the two women.

Elcira turned to him inquisitively.

"So you're cousins?" she asked.

"Second cousins," Hernando said. "You see, I'm a cousin of Ariadna's father. I'm from Charalá."

"And back there cousins go swimming with their cousins in next to nothing?"

"Elcira!" Ariadna snapped.

"Sorry, ma'am," Elcira replied. "I just want to know if I should wash his swimsuit."

Ariadna held back from correcting her maid's obvious insolence. Some force greater than her own desire compelled her to stay silent whenever Elcira meddled in her personal life—perhaps because Elcira often seemed complicit in her affairs, keeping quiet to her husband about her passing flings.

7. *Family ties*

Hernando walked in wearing a bathrobe, his face reflecting a slightly perplexed expression. Elcira was washing the dishes.

"Excuse me," he said. "Where do you keep the whisky bottles?"

"Don't you know already?" asked Elcira with sarcasm.

"I'm not as rapacious as you assume."

"You should have taken advantage of the liquor inventory in this house," Elcira muttered. "So they've already served you whisky? Must have been dizzying."

Elcira dried her hands on a dark blue towel.

"Dizzying?" Hernando repeated, confused.

Elcira had known the seediest streets of Bucaramanga long before Ariadna found her. At sixteen, escaping a violent stepfather, she had fallen into the hands of a pimp who made her work in a brothel downtown. For eight years she sold her body in foul-smelling rooms where time stopped between client and client, between bottle and bottle of cheap aguardiente.

It was Ariadna who saw her one rainy afternoon, soaked and crying on the corner of Carrera 27. She did not judge her. She did not ask uncomfortable questions. She simply said:

"Come with me. I can offer you something better."

And she kept her promise. She gave her a clean room, decent clothes, a dignified salary. She taught her to cook dishes she had never tasted, to wash crystal glasses with delicacy, to fold napkins as if they were origami. But above all, she returned something Elcira believed lost forever: her dignity.

That was why Elcira was fierce in her loyalty. Ariadna might be merely her employer, but beyond that she would always be her angel, her savior, her older sister, the only person who had ever seen in her something more than a used-up body.

Rafael had arrived at the house a few months earlier.

Tall, distinguished, with that intellectual air Ariadna found so captivating. He said he was an attorney, a business partner of Emeterio in a real estate project. He came frequently to discuss contracts and financial strategies.

From the first day, Elcira noticed how he looked at the señora. Not with the lust of the brothel clients, but with something worse: admiration disguised as understanding. He observed Ariadna with an intensity that promised to understand her in ways her husband never could.

"Your husband treats you like a decoration," Rafael would whisper on those afternoons when Emeterio traveled to Bogotá. "A woman like you deserves to be seen, truly heard."

Elcira had tried to warn Ariadna, but her señora silenced her gently.

"Don't worry, Elcira. I can take care of myself. Rafael is just a friend, a confidant."

But such intimacy does not occur between mere friends. Soon the visits extended beyond the professional. Rafael had dinner with them, played with Sofía and Camila, even played the piano while Ariadna watched him, spellbound. And Elcira saw the future the way one sees a storm forming on the horizon: inevitable and devastating.

One afternoon, while the girls were at school, Elcira entered the study and found them kissing by the window. Rafael had his hands around Ariadna's waist, and she was laughing in a way she hadn't in years.

"Señora!" exclaimed Elcira, and her voice cracked like a whip.

Rafael stepped back, uncomfortable. Ariadna blushed, though there was defiance in her eyes.

"Elcira, please…"

"No, señora. This has to stop. What if the girls see you? What if Mr. Emeterio finds out?"

Rafael smiled condescendingly.

"Elcira, right? I think the only person who should decide here is Ariadna. This doesn't concern you."

"It concerns me when I see you about to destroy this

family," replied Elcira fiercely.

Three weeks later, Emeterio returned from Bogotá without warning. Elcira was in the kitchen preparing dinner when she heard the Mercedes engine in the garage. Her heart jolted. Rafael was upstairs, in the study, with Ariadna. The girls were already asleep.

She rushed upstairs, but it was too late. Emeterio was climbing with firm steps, loosening his tie. Elcira tried to intercept him.

"Sir, let me help you with your suitcase. You must be tired from the trip…"

"Later, Elcira," he said, his voice unnervingly calm.

That terrified her more than if he had shouted.

Emeterio walked straight to the study. He did not knock. He simply turned the knob and pushed the door open.

Ariadna and Rafael were sitting on the leather sofa, very close, with whisky glasses in their hands. Rafael's hands rested on Ariadna's. They weren't doing anything improper at that exact moment, but the intimacy was unmistakable, hovering in the air like a dense perfume.

The silence was brutal.

"Emeterio…" began Ariadna, stepping away from Rafael and standing up.

Emeterio ignored her. His eyes were fixed on Rafael.

"I think you'd better leave, Rafael," he said, with that same terrible calm. "Now."

Rafael stood, attempting to maintain composure.

"Emeterio, my friend, we were just discussing the contract—"

"I'm not your friend," Emeterio interrupted. "Get out of my house. Don't come back."

But Rafael made his second mistake. Instead of leaving, he turned toward Ariadna with a protective gesture.

"Ariadna, you don't have to put up with this situation. You know you can count on me."

It was like lighting a fuse.

Emeterio crossed the room in three strides. He opened

the desk drawer and pulled out a pistol that Elcira didn't know he kept there. Rafael went pale.

"Emeterio, no!" Ariadna shouted.

"Go," hissed Emeterio, aiming at Rafael with a steady hand. "Go before I do something we'll all regret."

Rafael backed toward the door, hands raised, but his wounded pride betrayed him one last time.

"You're a coward who keeps his wife in a golden cage. That's why she comes to me. Because I offer her what you never can: passion, understanding—"

The shot thundered through the house.

Rafael collapsed to his knees, clutching his left shoulder. Blood poured between his fingers, staining the Persian rug that had been a wedding gift. Ariadna screamed. Sofía and Camila woke up crying in their rooms. And Elcira—Elcira ran toward Rafael with the linen napkins she had been folding minutes earlier, pressing them against the wound even though every part of her wanted to let him bleed out on the floor.

"Call an ambulance," ordered Emeterio, putting the weapon back into the drawer. His voice had regained that chilling calm. "And you"—he looked at Rafael with contempt—"if you ever come near my family again, the next shot will be to the head. Understood?"

Rafael nodded, panting in pain, his face pale as wax.

Elcira dialed emergency services with trembling hands while Ariadna collapsed on the sofa, sobbing.

Rafael survived. The bullet shattered his shoulder but did not touch any vital organs. Emeterio paid all medical expenses and hired lawyers who turned the incident into a "regrettable firearm-cleaning accident." Rafael did not press charges. He knew he would lose, and besides, Emeterio had contacts who could ruin his legal career with a single phone call.

Ariadna fell into a deep depression for months. She barely ate, barely spoke to the girls. She spent hours looking out the study window, absentmindedly touching the piano keys. Sofía and Camila tiptoed through the house, frightened by their mother's silence and their father's coldness.

Emeterio never mentioned the incident again. He simply increased his business trips. He no longer slept in the master bedroom. When at home, he treated Ariadna with an icy politeness, as if she were a stranger. The marriage became a choreography of forced courtesy and empty spaces.

"In front of her husband she wears only full-coverage swimsuits," Elcira confessed to Hernando that night in the kitchen—and it was true. Since the incident with Rafael, Ariadna covered herself in front of Emeterio as if her own body brought her shame.

And Elcira watched. She cleaned the study every day, especially the area where Rafael had fallen, even though the bloodstain had long disappeared. Some stains never leave completely—not from memory. She observed Ariadna with a mixture of pity and frustration. She loved her, yes, but she also blamed her for her recklessness, for risking everything she had for a moment of attention and understanding.

When she saw Hernando walk in that afternoon in a bathrobe, with that air of cultivated innocence and that shy smile Rafael had also worn at the beginning, Elcira felt the story repeat itself like a recurring nightmare.

She would not allow it. Not again.

That was why she was harsh with him. That was why she confronted him mercilessly in the kitchen.

"I know people like you," she told him. "With the señora half-naked, showing off her body toned by two hours of swimming a day—yes, that's the word: dizzying."

And when Hernando tried to defend himself with that contained arrogance all men like him possessed, she hurled the truth at him like a knife:

"I already had this conversation with Mr. Rafael a few months ago. A man better prepared than you."

She saw how Hernando paled as he understood. She saw the fear in his eyes. Good. Let him be afraid. Let him know what awaited him if he continued down that path.

"How?" asked Hernando.

"I saw your car in the parking lot," Elcira replied, and

her tone carried all the warning in the world.

She could not stand to see Ariadna destroy herself again. She could not watch Sofía and Camila grow up in a house shattered by another infidelity, hearing another gunshot in the middle of the night. Not after everything Ariadna had done for her.

That was why she was cruel with Hernando. That was why she pushed him until he fled that night, with Ariadna crying in the garage and the girls frightened in their rooms.

"You've lit a flame in the señora Ariadna," she had told him, "and for better or worse, only you can extinguish it. If you don't, those two girls will suffer!"

Because if Ariadna was too weak to protect herself, too hungry for affection to see the danger, then Elcira would do it for her.

Even if she had to be the villain.

Even if Ariadna hated her for it.

Even if Hernando thought she was a meddling servant.

It was her way of repaying the debt. Of giving back—even just a little—everything Ariadna had given her that rainy afternoon on Carrera 27, when she rescued her from hell and offered her a second chance to live with dignity.

She would not allow another man to destroy her savior. Not while Rafael's blood still stained her memory. Not while the girls' tears from that night still echoed in her ears.

Not as long as she drew breath and remembered the gunshot that had almost ended everything.

"Hernando!" Ariadna shouted from the living room.

"I'm coming!"

"At the end of the hallway on the left."

Hernando walked away, absorbing Elcira's boldness.

In front of the piano, he played Mozart's Turkish March, accompanied by the applause of Sofía and Camila.

"Bravo!" Ariadna exclaimed at the end of his performance. "Bravissimo!"

"Come on," Hernando excused himself. "It's just the performance of a dilettante."

"What's a dilettante?" asked Camila.

"Someone who takes art as a mere hobby," Hernando replied.

"In that case, all artists are," said Ariadna.

"That's what most people in this city of merchants and dancers believe."

"Who?" asked Ariadna.

"Those who panic when one of their protégés leans toward a profession that isn't commerce, politics, or medicine."

"Isn't art a hobby?"

"No," Hernando said, touching a couple of keys, "it's not."

Then he played Chopin's Funeral March. He stopped when he saw, above the piano, a photo of Ariadna in an evening gown, next to a mustached man in his sixties; at their sides, Sofía and Camila embraced them.

"I don't like you," said Camila.

Hernando looked at her hostile face. Ariadna hugged her.

"Hernando is quite a gentleman. Why don't you like him, my love?"

"Because he doesn't agree with you."

"Excuse me," said Hernando, his face pale. "I forgot an appointment. I have to go now."

He stood and headed toward the foyer; Ariadna followed him. He opened the door and entered his Chevrolet Aveo. As he sat down, Ariadna grabbed his arm.

"We made a mistake, Ariadna," Hernando said, placing his palm over her hand.

"You can't leave us like this," Ariadna's voice cracked. "Camila will apologize."

"That's not it," Hernando smiled awkwardly, "you already know. Sofía and Camila will know sooner or later, and you… you…"

"It's too dangerous for you to drive at this hour."

Hernando saw, behind Ariadna, Elcira's harsh expression.

Ariadna noticed his confusion and turned around.

"Elcira!" she exclaimed. "Have you cleared the table?"

"Everything is in order, my lady."

Hernando started the car before Ariadna's pleading, tear-streaked yet controlled face. He smiled at her one last time before his car vanished into the darkness.

It was Monday, and the pale dawn light hovered over the Bucaramanga plateau. Riakola, smoking a cigarette, stared at the jagged line of buildings, his face gaunt from exhaustion. Behind him, a 2006 Chevrolet Captiva parked next to his gray Audi; Pedro and Juan got out, each carrying a Russian-made rifle.

"I thought you weren't coming," he snapped.

"We received a call from Doctor Schwerter," said Pedro.

"At this hour of the night?" asked Riakola anxiously. "Did something happen?"

"Nothing beyond our control," replied Juan.

"We have six hours to prepare this hit."

"That's what we wanted to talk to you about," said Pedro, wiping the sweat from his bald head with a sky-blue silk handkerchief.

"At exactly noon, Tatareto and Marianne will arrive at the restaurant," said Riakola, ignoring his comment. "I'll go in and, politely, ask my wife for a few moments of conversation. I'll make Marianne come to her senses. Then you two will go in and unload your rounds on that damn oligarch."

"Sounds perfect," Juan nodded, blinking his single eye, "but…"

"It IS perfect," Riakola interrupted. "We just need to be sure which restaurant they're going to."

"Today we found out that Hernando Villanueva is untouchable."

"How?"

"Hernando is related to our Commander."

"To Doctor Schwerter?" Riakola faltered.

"To our chief associate," Pedro nodded, "Alias Espadas. He confirmed it himself."

"What's his relation to Schwerter?" Riakola growled.

"He's his only nephew," Juan cleared his throat.

Riakola's eyes wandered toward the horizon. He gasped, devastated, and threw his cigarette to the ground. Overcome by sudden fury, he kicked a rock.

"Damn it!" he shouted. "And how did he find out?"

Pedro and Juan exchanged glances.

"One of you told him," Riakola grumbled, noticing their complicity. "Bastards!"

"You know we always investigate anyone who threatens us," said Pedro.

"No one kills without justifications, Riakola," Juan added.

Riakola nodded stiffly.

"You may go, associates."

Pedro and Juan looked at each other.

"Doctor Schwerter wants to see you," Pedro said.

"What for?"

"He wants to warn you personally not to do anything stupid," said Pedro.

Riakola sighed in frustration. The matter had already been discussed behind his back.

"All right," sighed Riakola. "I'll be there."

"When?" asked Juan.

"This afternoon," Riakola hesitated.

Pedro and Juan got back into their car and drove off toward the commander's mansion.

Riakola continued staring at the city for several minutes.

Suddenly he grabbed his phone and dialed a number.

"Marianne?" he asked. "I know you won't answer my calls, so I'm leaving you this message, from the man who truly loves you. I just wanted to warn you about Tatareto. He's seeing a married woman. Yesterday he was at her house, swimming in her pool. I'll keep you informed."

When Riakola's voice faded into the recorder, the apartment remained suspended in a thick, almost monastic silence. Marianne stayed still for a moment, her hand still on the device, as if that message—clumsy, nocturnal, gasping—had left in the air a trail of rancid smoke she had to dispel by sheer force of will.

The grayish dawn light filtered through the window,

spilling over her features with the solemn sadness of an old oil painting. She ran her fingers through her hair—not to fix it, but to push away the moral exhaustion that Riakola's voice always awakened in her: a weariness older than any words, older even than recent history, as if the man's very presence evoked something that should have ended centuries ago.

She listened again, this time without really paying attention, only to confirm the texture of his voice, the intimate vibration of the message, the emotional pulse hidden beneath the poorly woven phrases.

And when she did, upon hearing that supposedly protective tone, Marianne felt a jab of lucid repugnance—not because Riakola was lying (it could be true), but because he did not understand that her relationship with Hernando wasn't yet romantic. His falsehood had the clumsiness of a child trying to imitate adult cruelty. He was trying to sound magnanimous, paternal even, but resentment sprouted like poisonous fungus in every pause, every hesitation, every overly long breath.

Nothing remained of the man she once believed she had loved. What she heard now was the feathered crowing of a defeated rooster, a being who first convinces himself he possesses moral authority and then attempts to impose it with shouts disguised as tenderness.

Marianne recognized his bark masquerading as a poem, a childish attempt to plant jealousy where no fertile ground remained.

"He's with a married woman… swimming in her pool… I'll keep you informed."

The phrases, muttered with almost theatrical jealousy, did not provoke the slightest pang in her chest. Why would they? She knew too well the inner workings of Riakola's character: every word directed at her always carried a twisted intention—never transparent, never pure.

Marianne had stopped believing in Riakola long ago. He did not know how to love without possessing; he did not know how to speak without surveilling; he did not know how to warn without accusing. She turned off the recorder with slow

deliberation, as if lowering the final curtain on that worn-out chapter of her life. She no longer believed in his warnings, in his imagined storms, in his penitential theatrics. The "warning" was a ritual: the wavering offering of a man who sensed his loss and, panicked, tried to assert himself by destroying what he could not understand.

She felt a peace resembling the silent music that floats after the last chord of a requiem. A peace that no longer allowed return. And she looked out over the city from above, saw dawn breaking over the rooftops, and understood—with the clarity of an ancient sentence—that no word from Riakola's mouth could alter her destiny anymore.

Bucaramanga in 2006 was a metropolis unique in the world, with every climate represented in its metropolitan area—from the deserts of Girón to the páramo of San Turbán, where so many Venezuelans had fallen victim to the cold after the famines perpetrated by the communist regime of the twenty-first century. Thirty minutes by car from the plateau, on the road to Berlín, stood the restaurant La Neblina, its views adorned by trans-Andean clouds.

The road descended in serpentine curves from the heights, bordered by lush vegetation marking the transition between climates. On the slope that fell from the main road toward the valley, the flora displayed the characteristic diversity of these Santander lands: tree ferns with broad, damp leaves swayed under perpetual drizzle; wild bromeliads and orchids colonized the trunks of yarumo trees with silver bark, whose vegetative fingers stretched toward the cloudy sky. Among the low underbrush grew salvias with purple blossoms, heliconias with orange and red petals resembling tongues of fire in the greenish gloom, and dense thickets of arrayán whose aromatic leaves perfumed the air when brushed by the breeze. Farther down, where the incline softened, appeared semi-wild coffee plants and mountain plantains, remnants of old abandoned farms. Mosses and lichens carpeted every available surface, turning stones and fallen branches into organic sculptures of green velvet. The sound of water running through invisible streams accompanied the sporadic song of

blackbirds and flycatchers sheltering from the rain.

Outside the restaurant, on a certain Sunday in October, Riakola waited around three in the afternoon. He had arrived an hour earlier, consumed by an anxiety that gnawed at his insides. He had stationed himself strategically where he could watch the entrance without being seen, smoking cigarette after cigarette, each drag a failed attempt to calm the turmoil boiling in his chest. Jealousy was not new to him—he had learned to live with that demon ever since realizing that love and power rarely coexisted peacefully—but this afternoon he felt something different: a humiliation that chewed at his dignity, the bitter knowledge that Marianne had betrayed him not only in deeds, but in her mind, where he no longer existed as the only possible man.

Under a drizzle that refracted the pale white rays of the afternoon into a glowing rainbow, Riakola saw Hernando and Marianne leave and head toward her car parked on the unpaved roadside. The rainbow seemed to him like a cosmic joke, a symbol of hope precisely when his world was collapsing. He saw them laugh—or at least he thought he did—and that gesture, real or imagined, was the spark that ignited the powder keg of his pent-up rage.

He approached them, rolling up the sleeves of his shirt, a mechanical gesture he had seen his father perform before beatings—a masculine ritual of preparation for violence that he now repeated without thinking.

"Why don't you leave my wife alone, Tatareto?" asked Riakola, his eyes swollen with jealousy, his voice trembling not with fear but with a rage so intense he could barely articulate it.

"Riakola!" Marianne snapped, and in her voice he detected not the worried love he expected, but annoyance—perhaps contempt—which only deepened the wound.

"You have recently defamed a lady," said Hernando, with a calm that Riakola found unbearable. "I am correcting your abuses, my friend Riakola."

The word "friend" rang like sarcasm. Hernando stood with a moral uprightness that Riakola recognized as genuine, and that made him even angrier. How dare this bohemian, this

literature professor who lived with his head in the clouds, judge him? Interfere between him and what he considered his?

"You don't respect my women," Riakola retorted, throwing his fist at his old schoolmate.

At the moment of impact, Riakola felt a dark, primitive pleasure—the satisfaction of making contact with his enemy's flesh. But it was short-lived.

Hernando hardened his face and absorbed the punch to his cheek. For an instant, something ancestral awoke in him—the pride of his lineage, the memory of his father telling him stories of his ancestors, men of the land who, at the Charalá Fair, would throw bulls across the ring, grabbing them by the horns with hands like iron clamps. He was not a violent man by nature; in fact, violence repulsed him. But in that instant he understood that stepping back would be a form of cowardice that would haunt him forever. He raised his fist, more out of dignity than anger, and struck his rival in the nose, feeling the unpleasant crack of cartilage giving way under his knuckles.

Riakola screamed, bleeding profusely. The physical pain was secondary to the shock of being defeated. He, who controlled territories, who commanded armed men, had been beaten in a fair fight by an intellectual. The humiliation was unbearable.

With his nose shattered, seized by an irrational panic mixed with homicidal rage, he pulled out his pistol. In his mind—clouded by pain and shame—the solution was simple: eliminate the source of his humiliation. He stopped when he heard the triggers of Pedro and Juan's carbines click beside his temples.

The metallic sound brought him back to reality like a bucket of cold water. His own men—men he had recruited, trained, trusted—were betraying him. Or no, he realized with sudden, terrible clarity: they weren't betraying him; they were reminding him of his mid-level rank in a hierarchy imposed with blood and fire. Jealous fury had made him forget who was truly in charge.

His associates were aiming at his head.

"You wouldn't dare," he muttered, though he knew they would. It was a plea disguised as a challenge.

"The Commander," Juan said firmly, "will forgive us."

Riakola then felt the full vertigo of his insignificance. He, who thought himself powerful, was just a disposable piece on a larger board.

Behind them, Joel—a blond nineteen-year-old wearing a tight red silk shirt with an open collar—took Riakola's gun in his hands with the natural ease of someone entirely familiar with such situations. He examined it like a capo inspecting a tool of the trade and tucked it into his Indian-wool garment. He smiled at Hernando and greeted him with a handshake—a gesture of absurd normality in the midst of freshly contained violence.

"How are you, cousin?" Joel asked with genuine affection.

"Joel…" murmured Hernando, grateful, still processing how close he had come to death.

"Forgive him," Joel said, gesturing dismissively at Riakola. "Riakola is an efficient associate; he's just a little heartbroken these days."

Reducing his existential drama to simple heartbreak was, for Riakola, another slap—this time psychological. Joel puckered his lips toward Pedro and Juan and pointed to his latest-model Jeep. The two men escorted Riakola to his car with the impersonal efficiency of those handling livestock.

"He wanted to kill me," murmured Hernando, the shock finally settling in.

Joel took his cousin by the arm and led him away from the onlookers watching them in disbelief, like spectators of a drama too real to be entertainment.

"Do you want them to send you to the other world?" Joel asked, his cavernous voice contrasting with his youthful appearance. "What are you doing flirting with the girlfriends of narco traffickers?"

Hernando looked at him in horror, understanding for the first time the real dimensions of the danger he had plunged into through sheer romantic imprudence.

"Isn't it unnerving to have that kind of power?" Joel laughed with a mix of cynicism and genuine amusement. "You'll never stop being a bohemian, cousin! We respect that. Forget what

you've seen. I promise you no one will bother you again."

"Thank you," Hernando stammered, feeling both grateful and deeply uncomfortable with the implicit debt he had just incurred.

"Say hello to my aunt," Joel replied. "I've already spoken to her."

Hernando stepped back, confused, feeling how the tentacles of his family extended even into the most private corners of his life.

"About what?"

"Your imprudence," Joel explained. "They've seen you in questionable bars. She agreed with me; she accepts that you're the kind who looks for trouble where none exists."

Hernando felt a pang in his chest—not only because of the implicit betrayal by his mother, but because he recognized they might be right. He sought authenticity in dangerous places, confusing risk with truth, marginality with honesty.

"But I get it. I also argue with my mother over skirt issues," Joel added with a complicit smile, attempting to normalize the abnormal.

Marianne took Hernando's hand—a gesture of solidarity he appreciated more than he could express.

"I see she likes you," Joel told Marianne with an evaluative look. "Take care! These are turbulent times, and my cousin doesn't carry weapons."

Marianne, at the wheel, was driving toward Bucaramanga from the Páramo de San Turbán. The road descended again down the slope, now in the opposite direction, and the vegetation that had earlier seemed beautiful to Hernando now felt threatening, as if behind every fern and every yarumo tree some danger could be hiding. The arrayán trees no longer smelled like comfort but like vegetal menace, and the invisible streams sounded like whispered warnings.

Hernando sat beside her, holding an ice pack against his right cheek, the cold against his skin a physical reminder of his own vulnerability.

"How many subversives do you know?" Marianne asked,

her voice carrying a mix of curiosity, reproach, and perhaps fear.

"None," Hernando answered automatically, with the defensiveness of someone unjustly accused all his life of the sins of his family.

Marianne looked at him skeptically, her eyes clearly saying: *Don't lie to me.*

"Joel Schwerter is my cousin," Hernando explained. "I see him very rarely."

"Schwerter?"

"That's his last name."

"Are you related to Doctor Enrique Schwerter?" Marianne asked—and Hernando detected in her voice a tone he knew well: the morbid fascination mixed with repulsion. "The infamous commander?"

"Yes," Hernando nodded, feeling the familial weight of that admission. "He is my uncle."

"They've linked him to several massacres."

"You're speaking to me as if I were the one responsible," said Hernando, and in his voice there was genuine pain—the pain of someone who had carried a surname all his life that was simultaneously protection and condemnation.

"A festival of impunity."

Hernando chewed on her words, feeling the bitterness of being unable to rebut something he knew, deep down, was true. Finally he replied with the only thing he could say:

"Okay," he nodded. "But remember it's about forgiving."

The word *forgiving* sounded hollow even to his own ears—like a theological abstraction against the materiality of crimes.

"Thanks to your family ties, you're still alive," said Marianne, and the brutal truth of that statement hovered between them like an accusation. "And Riakola? What will they do with him?"

Hernando furrowed his brow in uncertainty. He didn't want to think about Riakola; he didn't want to contemplate the possible consequences of what had happened. He preferred to take refuge in ignorance, in denial, in the illusion that his bohemian life could continue intact, separated from the world of violence he

came from but which—he now understood with terrible clarity—had never really abandoned him. He carried that world in his blood, in his surname, in the connections that had saved him that afternoon but also chained him to a reality he had tried to flee all his life.

"Have you not thought of taking revenge on Riakola?"

"Revenge on such an indispensable character?"

"Sometimes I think you court me for the mere pleasure of offending him."

"It would be more to forgive him," Hernando said, "because I know creation regulates everything."

He studied her thoughtfully. She was a beautiful figure that reminded him of the precept of Gilberto, his philosophy teacher: *'If you marry a young, wealthy lady, she will cheat on you; court an older, poor woman and you'll be happy with your lover.'*

"Is it true that you're seeing a married woman?" asked Marianne.

"Who told you that?"

"Riakola."

Hernando sighed, somewhat embarrassed.

"Will you believe me if I tell you that relationship already ended?"

The next day, Hernando arrived at the office with a black eye. He sat at his desk with the resigned clumsiness of someone who has slept little and thought too much. He drew lines on a blueprint, trying to cling to geometry, as if the exactness of the drawing could order the mental chaos that had ambushed him since the night before.

Opposite him, Ariadna watched him with a fierce stillness. She had arrived early—earlier than usual—with her hands resting on an already finished plan. Her fingers tapped softly on the tracing paper with the slow cadence of an inner requiem. She appeared calm, but it was the calm of someone who had sealed a fate and no longer needed to pretend doubt. She had the look of a woman who had crossed a burning bridge behind her.

Hernando, nervous, tried to smile at her, but the smile was born dead. He looked at the wall clock: ten minutes to noon.

"Hernando," she said at last, with a sweetness that smelled like a sentence. "That bruise must hurt. Are you all right?"

He nodded without raising his eyes.

"Yes… a silly accident."

Ariadna gave him a sad smile, almost touched by his clumsiness.

"Accidents," she whispered, "are rarely silly. Sometimes they're just the prologue to tragedy. And you and I… darling… have already passed the first act."

Hernando felt an ancient cold climb up his spine.

"What does that mean?"

She leaned forward, and the cold morning light illuminated her eyes like quartz mirrors.

"It means there's no turning back. I've decided to divorce Emeterio. Today I'll go to the lawyer. I don't care if my daughters—eleven and twelve—find out in the school hallways, if their classmates whisper 'your mother ran off with the draftsman.' Let them talk. Let them invent. I no longer live for others. I live for what I desire. And I desire you."

Hernando felt the ground open beneath his feet.

"Ariadna, please…"

"Listen to me," she interrupted, with that terrifying gentleness of inevitable tragedies. "My house in Lagos del Cacique will soon be free. You could move in there. No financial worries. No Ramiro shouting. No mortgages. Just the two of us. I could give you what your wife never gave you: freedom to be who you really are."

He shook his head, stunned.

"I can't. I… have…"

"You have a little French girl," she cut him off, and her smile sharpened into a stiletto. "They saw you together in a car. Very pretty, very young. Her name is Marianne, right? The interesting part," she added with a venomous whisper, "is that Marianne is engaged to Riakola Quintana. The same man who controls the Ruta del Sol. A dangerous affair, Hernando. Excessively dangerous. One of these days, she'll disappear… or you will, if you keep seeing her."

The world tilted like an unbalanced table.

"Are you threatening me?"

"I'm warning you," said Ariadna, "that rejected love has a long memory."

She said it with a theatrical tone, as if in her mind a Greek chorus was already chanting. Then she closed her eyes, searched her memory for a quote, and recited softly, almost voluptuously:

"There is no worse wickedness than that of a woman who harbors evil thoughts in her heart…"

Hernando swallowed.

It was Euripides' Phaedra invoking her fate.

She continued:

On se venge mal d'une insulte
Qu'à force de la faire oublier.

I will avenge your insult
by making you forget it ever existed…
under my roof…
or underground.

And there Hernando understood—with growing horror—that Ariadna was not imitating Phaedra: she **was** Phaedra.

Euripides' and Racine's at the same time.

From Euripides she had the shadow, the inevitable tragedy, that Aphrodite who punishes those who despise her domain. She had begun to pull strings for weeks, perhaps since the whisky she offered him right after he quit drinking.

From Racine she had the voice, the feverish vehemence, the executive power of the murderous accusation. She was Phaedra delivering her sentence even before killing herself.

And he… he was an office Hippolytus—poor, unarmed, naive. A man who believed that rectitude protected him. Absurd. Modern gods did not send sea monsters: they sent memos, disciplinary committees, anonymous complaints, hitmen, professional rumors.

"You can't do this to me," murmured Hernando.

She smiled with false tenderness.

"Of course I can. I'm already doing it."

At that moment, the door opened abruptly. Ramiro stormed in with crumpled invoices.

"Do you have the damn plans ready, or are we still playing house?" he barked.

Hernando barely managed to say:

"I'll have them by tomorrow night…"

"Tomorrow night?" Ramiro approached, saw the black eye, and his expression darkened. "And that eye? Drunk again?"

"No, sir, I…"

"He smells like alcohol from here," Ariadna interjected with impeccable coldness. "Last night I saw him stumbling out of Bar Roma. I think he has a problem, Ramiro. A serious one."

It was the final dart.

Racine's accusation: the French Phaedra planting poison in Hippolytus's throat, her thwarted desire turning into addiction and turning into obsession. A perfect lie.

Ramiro sniffed near Hernando's face.

"He reeks of whisky," he concluded. "To my office. Now."

As Ramiro pushed him down the hallway, Hernando felt an ancient laughter rise from the depths of time.

The gods—old or new—were entertained.

In Euripides, Hippolytus looks up at the sun and asks:

O pure sun! Have I lived like an impure man?

His innocence does not save him.

In Racine, he murmurs:

Would you not believe me if I spoke?

But no one listens. Hernando still had a voice, but what use was a voice in a trial whose verdict was already written? Ariadna remained alone in the office, stroking the blueprint with her fingers, like Phaedra caressing Theseus's sword before plunging it

into her belly.

She already imagined the next scene: the anonymous complaint in Human Resources, the blurry photograph of him entering the bar with Marianne, the rumor reaching Palma's ears.

Rejected love had turned into pure hatred.

And the modern gods—Hernando thought—did not kill immediately.

They let you live, but undone with surgical precision.

In Doctor Schwerter's mansion, at the same time, three teenage girls in dental-floss bikinis and three bodyguards walked along the poolside, where a vallenato trio was playing songs by Diomedes Díaz.

At the opposite end, Riakola—his face pale and bruised from the beating the night before—stood between the hulking figures of Pedro and Juan.

"According to what they told me, the female in question has a restraining order against you," said Doctor Schwerter in a commanding voice.

Hernando's uncle was a tall man, dressed now in a bathrobe, with gray hair and eyes shadowed by power.

He settled into his leather armchair; at his sides, the pubescent girls did his manicure and pedicure simultaneously.

"Yes, of course!" Riakola nodded stupidly. "I report to my superior commander, the chief of the swords!"

"Speak without theatrics," Schwerter snapped.

"Ma-ma-ma—" Riakola stammered, "Marianne provoked me in a moment of fury by flirting with an old acquaintance. You know how women are, Doctor Schwerter!"

To the right, on a purple plastic lounge chair, Joel—wearing a tight swimsuit—leaned back as he lit a cigarette; a waiter was preparing a Tom Collins for him from a silver rolling bar.

Dr. Schwerter lifted his piercing eyes.

"Because I know them, I'm telling you."

Schwerter smiled dismissively at one of the teenage girls, who in turn smiled back seductively.

"How old are you, gorgeous?"

"If I tell you, you'll send me home," replied the underage girl.

"Without your innocence I'd never have to fight against so many fools," Schwerter smiled.

"Without your generosity we wouldn't have so many opportunities in life."

"The best part of having money," said Schwerter, "is that you can give it away generously; it makes people happy and grateful."

"Everyone in my house admires you," the nymph nodded. "We never forget the favors you do for us."

Schwerter burst into loud laughter.

"And to think there are idiots accusing me of being a pedophile," he scoffed. "Those idiots don't know life as it is. One has to go from village to village with the only incentive of helping these little mermaids."

The teenager stood up and dived into the pool, showing off her figure provocatively to Pedro, Juan, and Riakola.

"That bitch no longer wants to see you," Schwerter told Riakola. "Why do you insist on seducing her when there are so many grateful nymphs around here?"

"Tastes, Associate Schwerter."

"You get mixed up with crafty older women," Schwerter sighed. "One already accused Gómez of raping her."

"Don't tempt me, boss," said Riakola. "I know Marianne still loves me."

"That whore filed a restraining order on you."

Riakola slammed his fist on the floor.

"Calm down!" Pedro intervened.

"They must have also told you," Riakola grumbled, "that we've seen each other several times, and that Marianne has never—and listen to me, never—called the police."

Schwerter looked at his wristwatch impatiently.

"It's time to dot the i's, Riakola," Schwerter said, lowering his tone. "From today on you will be responsible for my nephew's well-being. And if anything happens to Hernando, even a car accident or a fall into a trench on the sidewalk, you will be the only

one responsible."

Pedro and Juan whispered with a wicked grin.

"Did you learn that from *Chinatown*?" Pedro asked Juan.

"From *The Godfather*," Juan laughed.

Pedro and Schwerter laughed in unison. Riakola looked at them while swallowing hard.

"Did you understand?" Dr. Schwerter asked.

"The Tatareto is not one of ours!" Riakola shouted furiously.

The music stopped abruptly; all eyes turned to Schwerter.

"And you," said the guerrilla commander, "who asked for your opinion?"

"The Tatareto is a stranger, Doctor," Riakola insisted. "A son of a bitch who doesn't even come visit you!"

Schwerter looked at him coldly.

Joel rose from his seat with a switchblade, and with feline speed grabbed Riakola's face in one hand, placing the metal blade against his throat.

Riakola whimpered and opened his eyes in terror.

"Insult a member of my family again and I'll bleed you out," Joel told him.

Joel cut Riakola's cheek, who fell to the floor howling in pain, bleeding profusely.

Joel took a towel and wiped his bloodied blade with it.

He threw the piece of cloth at Riakola, who immediately pressed it against his cheek.

"Forgive me," Riakola babbled. "I…"

Joel gestured to the waiter, who escorted Riakola out of the house.

"It's clear he'll survive his heartbreak," Doctor Schwerter told his son.

"We'll eliminate him as soon as he gives me the access codes to his accounts," Joel nodded.

Schwerter looked at him with a complicit expression.

"The bald one and the one-eyed one will come with me," Joel added.

Pedro and Juan nodded.

"All right," Schwerter admitted. "In the meantime, I'll take the necessary steps to make it look like an accident."

8. *The Duel*

Joel watched them, thinking this wasn't the life his father had planned for him. How he envied the calm of his cousin Hernando, whose only worries were his endless love affairs—the latest with Riakola's former French lover, the little Parisian from Pan de Azúcar!

Dr. Schwerter—the patriarch, the brain behind the family empire—was a pillar of society. Owner of the Gangas Mil supermarket chain, forty-eight stores from Cúcuta to Neiva, he appeared in society magazines as "Businessman of the Year," donated to orphanages at Christmas, paid for medical degrees for the humble employees' kids, opened synthetic turf fields in poor neighborhoods with photogenic smiles. But off-camera, he shipped "medicine": cocaine hidden in Gangas Mil tuna cans, Doña Manola rice bags, La Vaquita Azul powdered-milk boxes.

His money-laundering, once hunted, now tolerated in astronomical sums by politicians and businessmen not just in Colombia but worldwide, also lined the pockets of powerful senators—like Senator Cosek from Antioquia who came back from Miami with millions in diplomatic luggage after meeting his countless lovers; or Senator Moore, who took donations from Cayman Islands NGOs; or even several high-court judges, always ready to prosecute enemies and pardon friends, quick to bury investigations with a "no merit, no rush."

For the rest, Dr. Schwerter was neither guerrilla nor paramilitary, and he didn't kill civilians. Unlike the coastal capos or the Medellín crowd who flaunted mansions, Bengal tigers, and magazine covers, or the Cali guys who fell because of too many women and jealous betrayals, Dr. Schwerter had ironclad ethics:

"Listen to me, Joel, because they don't teach this at any university. Never flaunt your power: the man who has to show it has already lost it. Noise is for the spiritually poor, the ones who confuse fear with respect and gold with authority. Real power is

quiet, invisible, precise; it's exercised in a whisper, with a signature or a glance. Never have more than one woman: one is enough to know you, to hold you up, and—if she decides—to destroy you. All the others are shadows that cloud judgment and crack loyalty. I've been with your mother thirty-five years and I still haven't figured her out, but at least I know the ground I'm walking on. Never touch civilians—not one. No kidnapping, no extortion, no rising to their bait. Innocent blood brings punishment no church, no witch doctor, no lawyer can wash away. This business is shadows, and in shadows you must live. Give up applause and the cheap desire for others to envy you: a quiet life isn't shouted, isn't photographed, isn't confessed. Social media is a trap where you offer yourself to the enemy, and the press is an altar for priests who profit off other people's secrets and private miseries. Silence protects more than an army. And never forget the family comes above all. Partners change, governments fall, judges sell out, friends vanish, but blood, Joel, is the sea you were born in, and no matter how much you deny or betray it, you'll be like the waves that rush toward the beach only to prove in the sand how fake their freedom really is. Respect that order and you'll live with dignity; break it, and you'll know the contempt of your own and problems that never forgive."

Joel could have been regional manager for Gangas Mil, office in the Cacique mall, suit and tie, attending Chamber of Commerce events. But during his business-administration semester at UCLA in 1998 he saw a documentary. A Colombian screenwriter famous for narco-series—hoarse voice, tired eyes—said in a talk:

"Colombia really is El Dorado. Not because of the gold the Spaniards were looking for. The treasure wasn't underground—it was right out in the open: coca, and even more so, cocaine. Ship a load to New York, L.A., Madrid… and you're a millionaire in a week. Today's conquistadors are the hundreds of ordinary men and women who walk through customs with a kilo of white powder. But that bonanza will end the day they legalize it."

Joel felt proud of his daring father. And decided he too would live in the shadows as the boss's heir.

The cigarette hurt his lungs like an invisible file scraping away.

Joel held it one second longer, stubborn, the way someone stares over the edge of a cliff to see if the cliff stares back. The ember lit a copper reflection in the ashtray glass and on the still surface of the pool—a dark mirror pretending to be the sky so no one would notice the real sky up there was something else and had less patience. Altos de Cabecera lay below like a breathing animal, and farther off headlights climbed and descended the hills of Palonegro, white and red threads crossing and cutting each other as if the city were playing alone with a pair of scissors.

There was no party noise. On this terrace sounds behaved. The marble bar kept its secrets, the Beluga sweated drops on the ice-cold glass, the Zacapa was a bottled promise that smelled of old wood and macerated fruit. The orchids—planted by his mother when she still used flowers to hide her suspicion that the house was cursed with success—leaned slightly in the breeze; the heliconias looked like tongues about to say something rude; the bromeliads bled color without asking permission.

Joel inhaled smoke with a Romanian doctor's phrase still nailed behind his forehead:

"You're young and handsome. Quit the vices and walk ten thousand steps a day; your heart is older than you are. EKGs don't lie."

Tests never lied, but business didn't either.

His mansion was called a penthouse because of its commanding view over the city, but the huge patio was actually on the first floor of a twenty-four-story building perched on the hill of Altos de Cabecera, as if the rest of the world were down in the mud and they were up here in the clean air that came down from the páramo carrying scents of moss and waterfalls. The terrace was the throne of an empire: heated infinity pool spilling toward the void, making the city look like a reflecting well; Italian-marble bar with bottles lined up like soldiers at rest—Buchanan's 18 waiting its turn, Beluga vodka chilled perfectly by a hidden system no one saw but everyone felt, Zacapa Centenario rum smelling of toasted oak and dark vanilla; Corinthian-leather chairs that hugged the body like a discreet lover; Murano crystal ashtrays that caught the halogen light like forgotten jewels.

The view was a luxury denied to strangers: Bucaramanga spread out like a crumpled rug, lights winding along the plateau's arteries, Palonegro in the background like a shadow keeping secrets of old battles and fresh shipments. The wind carried jasmine from the neighbor's yard and bus exhaust from Calle 33.

Coloso de Piedra was the name of the concrete-and-glass behemoth wedged into a hill that watched over the people of Bucaramanga like a sentinel. Joel saw his face broken into halogen-lit fragments on the water's surface and walked to the built-in glass bar with its hidden refrigeration system that made ice forever. The plants flanking it—bromeliads, heliconias, orchids—had been planted by his mother, Doña Helena, to counteract the gunpowder smell from the fireworks his father loved so much.

He picked up the silver lighter—his old man's gift for his twenty-eighth birthday, presented amid controlled laughter and proper suits—and snapped it shut with a dry click.

Smoke poured from Joel's nose as if trying to crawl back into the cigarette rather than stay in his lungs. "Last one," he told himself, convinced, the same fervor an alcoholic feels every Sunday morning.

Dr. Yasmín Haddad had been blunt at Los Olivos Clinic:

"You've got the blood pressure of a sixty-year-old and cholesterol through the roof."

Joel had nodded, running a hand through his black hair, his green eyes avoiding the doctor's, fingers brushing the aquiline nose half-broken in a fight with the Castaño brothers at San Pedro Claver when he was fifteen. With that strange jolt of unexpected memory he saw their blood on the courtyard again and tasted the fleeting glory of victory. How could he avoid it? This was the life he had chosen.

Someone coughed behind him, a hollow whiskey-slide down the throat. It was Baldy Pedro, flashing his perfect, then-fashionable white teeth—at the cost of his natural ones.

One-Eye Juan stared at him too, his good eye dull glass, asking for his Buchanan's with the dignity of a beggar asking for a light. Riakola, beside him, showed his gold tooth, working his jaw as if chewing the news of a new shipment safe in Miami.

Joel crossed to the felt-top table, his Italian shoes caressing his feet with every tile. Sitting was, for Joel, a ceremony of power: the leather welcomed him, the chair hugged him, the body remembered the shape of that backrest. Because getting used to comfort was the first duty of men who refused to live as nobodies. The second was to deny that vices and pleasures existed. The third was to believe luck owed you something, or that sins paid for themselves.

He sat at the green felt table imported from Monte Carlo and opened a Spanish deck—Joel hated the French deck, too cold, too passionless.

Hundred-dollar bills, silent judges, emerged smelling brand-new from one of Juan's bundles.

Joel shuffled with the precision of a surgeon scrubbing in. The cards sounded serious, no cheap tricks.

The city's engine down below hummed like a hotel mini-fridge. Nothing disturbing. Nothing that could drown out a click if someone decided to check the time.

He reminded himself he wasn't among friends. Three mobsters sharing the same bottle.

Pedro's hands could work any deck like a magician: they could slice air with a jack and land it exactly where it needed to be.

Joel didn't know Pedro was secretly working for the DEA, passing routes to the DIJIN in manila envelopes—then selling the same routes to the paras for a little more. In this business, loyalty was a whore who slept with the highest bidder, and Pedro always knew who was paying top dollar that week.

Riakola, the gold-tooth man, looked like he came from a city buried beneath the city. Shoulders built for carrying crates heavier than any man should. He breathed like something wild was caged in his chest against its will. The tooth now shone more with guilt than vanity. It had cost three million in Cúcuta in 2004 and was already the cause of an old regret. Tonight that regret had a name: Nohora Valentina Sánchez, in the shape of a bomb-collar in Tibú, August 2003. And a letter Riakola had burned after reading twenty times: "I haven't seen you since 2003."

They dealt. The jack of clubs hit the table with a whisper that

knew nothing of metaphors. The two of clubs showed up like a short knife. The five of cups laid its wine belly under the lamp. The ace of cups played hard to get. Money slicked its face with light. Hundreds, printer-fresh, Franklin's knowing stare that had seen every bar, the warm feel of bills just ripped from a bundle.

Joel called the numbers in the voice of a clerk telling life to wait its turn.

"Twelve on the table."

Pedro asked for a card.

Juan asked.

Riakola stayed, looking like all he needed was a dead match in his mouth to complete the picture.

The city wind howled like it was about to change its mind. Pedro drummed the table. That hand, Joel thought, was the same one that once palmed an ace under its tongue to survive a raid in Cúcuta. He glanced at Juan: the eye patch didn't stop him from being the best triggerman alive.

Pedro hit and drew the knight of coins like a traffic ticket.

"Son of a bitch," he whispered, voice of a man who'd forgotten the saints' names.

Joel collected; the bills stuck to his fingers as if they knew they wouldn't be going back to the safe anytime soon. Juan hit and flew with a king that had a crown for days but not for this table. The palm-slap on the felt was the usual one, as if hitting the table could convince fate it had bad taste. Joel smoothed the damp hair off his forehead. No rush. The night would last exactly as long as he said.

Sometimes glass breaks from the inside.

"And the gold gentleman?" he asked with the polite smile that spelled bad news.

"I stand," Riakola said, the word catching in his throat for a second. A dry stand, no tears.

Joel looked into those round eyes. Inside was a torn photograph. He kept his thoughts to himself.

"Eleven on the table," he murmured, and his voice carried the schooling of a man who learned to count without counting out loud.

Pedro scratched the back of his neck; Juan laughed into his

whiskey so it wouldn't spill. The terrace shifted tone, the way a musician tests a string before playing for real.

Joel wasn't superstitious, but some nights smelled metallic. He glanced sideways at the Beretta sleeping behind his jacket, a small bulge that followed him like a nameless dog. He noticed Juan's revolver, black grip peeking just enough, warming against its owner's body. You don't think about these things until you have to.

Words came out like ground glass: syllables that glinted, cut, without anyone asking their meaning.

Joel dropped a joke about the latest Orito shipment—on purpose, in that jovial-boss tone that sold camaraderie the way rice goes on sale.

"Saw the receipt," he said, smiling like he was smiling about something else.

Pedro's laugh sounded like a plastic bell. Juan pretended not to listen, the gunman's posture of looking over shoulders, that choreography of men who want to look distracted so they earn the right to stay alive.

Riakola growled low in his throat, the sound of an animal caught in a trap. Steel told itself the time had come, and none of the four heard it until they did.

To betray or not to betray?

Riakola's hand moved before the words. A lightning bolt with an address. Juan's revolver changed owners with a dry yank, cold metal sliding from one sweaty palm to another. The first shot was polite, precise, no adjectives. Baldy Pedro's mouth stayed open—not to ask questions but because jaws sometimes don't realize the body is gone. A perfect black hole appeared dead center in his forehead, the size of a period at the end of a sentence, blood seeping slow at first, then spurting, painting the yellow shirt red with the ease of a graffiti artist on a white wall. The chair fell backward like it was tired of holding him, legs scraping the floor with a screech that sounded like goodbye. The body toppled sideways, head hitting marble with the hollow thump of a ripe coconut, eyes wide open staring at the pool as if looking for a reflection that no longer reflected anything.

Joel was already unbuttoning his jacket before the echo finished bouncing off the glass, fingers moving on instinct, years of practice in situations you don't rehearse. The hand that went for the Beretta asked no questions; it had been answering for him for years, cold metal against palm like an old friend who never fails. Riakola's eyes held a wretched affection for the decision he'd made, a glint of madness that looked like rage but was really ice-cold calculation. They fired together and the thunder was one single roar, the blast ricocheting off glass walls, making the pool vibrate, shattering the terrace silence like glass falling in slow motion.

The slug in Joel's chest felt like a hot brick, stealing his air, the world tilting two degrees, vision blurring at the edges. Air turned to barbed wire, slicing his throat, chest whistling like a badly shut door.

One-Eye recovered from the shock like the pro he was: a sharp kick to Gold-tooth's elbow and the gun flew, tracing a silver arc under the halogen lights, kissing the pot where the blood-red bromeliad stood unmoved, vegetable indifference of things without sin, the revolver hitting dirt with a dull thud and rolling to rest against a heliconia.

Riakola let out a sound in no known language, a guttural wail of pain and fury, and jumped. The railing let him go like a lover who was done, the void greeting him with the courtesy of mourners. An old samán tree stuck a branch into the script so the stats wouldn't look so bad that night.

Crack.

He lived.

Bark tore flesh, the body fell with the weight of necessity, left arm twisting at an angle nature never intended, the lawn catching him badly—wet from the automatic sprinklers—pain moving in like a tenant who pays upfront, fire climbing from shoulder to neck. Joel managed to stagger to the edge, blood spreading across his white shirt like ink in water, clenched his teeth and fired twice more out of pure pride, recoil jarring his wounded arm, one bullet chewing grass and throwing dirt, the other howling past a stranger's ear into the night. His chest whistled like a badly shut door, every breath a knife.

Juan was at his side, 123 already on his tongue, fingers shaking over the phone keypad. He dialed wrong, cursed the keys—"son of a bitch"—corrected, repeated the address with the desperation of men who never want to memorize another:

"We're in the Coloso de Piedra building! First floor…! A man's dying! Hurry! Shot in the chest! Lots of blood!"

The siren began drawing a line in the night, distant at first, a wail that grew slowly—always slow when you need it fast. Joel tried to say a name, just one, the only one that mattered, and a last order that was pure wounded-animal instinct:

"Find Riakola…!" he gurgled.

He wanted to curse him and all that came out was wet air, his own chest bubbling like a glass with a napkin in it; he tasted blood on his lips and felt an urgent drowsiness.

The city found out through the doorman, who called the supervisor in an obedient boy's voice:

"Sir, there's a man here who got killed—shots with his bodyguards on the first floor."

The neighbor who owned two Dalmatians heard and moaned three times while her dogs barked like they smelled death.

"My God! No! Right here in Cabecera!"

A taxi driver parked outside picked up the police chatter and soon the whole city knew about the crime.

The elevator came up with two paramedics fresh from another emergency; they had the tired faces of people who've seen every way a human being can decide—or allow himself—to get stabbed. The stretcher guy smelled of chlorine and pure alcohol.

Cops came in, looked, asked the bare minimum.

"How many shots? Who's the wounded man?"

The paramedics pressed gauze hard on Joel's chest while the ashtray sent up a thin line of smoke like a pencil-written accusation.

On the table the cards never moved. The jack of cups stared at its own picture like it had been caught in someone else's room. The seven of swords looked sharp. The knight of coins looked richer than before. The king of cups was partying somewhere else. The two of swords had never been more honest watching the bromeliad beside it.

9. Record of a violent person

He dropped into the Taurus like a castaway collapsing onto his raft: no faith in the river, but with the stubborn will to float it. The door shut with a short thud; the echo reminded him of the gunshot that had silenced Pedro and opened Joel. His left arm throbbed with an alien pulse, blunt and insistent, as if a second heart had grown inside his bicep. He pushed the seat back with his good hand and cracked the window barely two fingers wide. Air: hot, Bucaramanga-at-dawn air, with the bitterness of old gasoline and freshly watered gardens.

"This is the price," he told himself, and the gold tooth at the back of his mouth gave a tiny, intimate chime, like a coin striking porcelain in a sink.

He turned the key. The engine coughed once, then settled into its workshop purr. He drove down Calle 49 on pure predator instinct, never looking back at the terrace where Joel bled like a proud animal refusing the knife. He ran every red light with the calm of a killer: looking before, looking after, never looking for forgiveness. On the dash, the fuel light blinked lazily. It would be enough. It had to be.

His first U-turn came at Calle 33, lights off for three seconds that felt like a technical sin. In the rearview mirror, the city kept its habits: a girl in a bakery uniform, a stray dog, a bus running empty. No one yet knew the night had already sent the bill.

Pain in his arm tightened like a hoop. He glanced down. The shirt clung to his flesh in a warm crust; beneath it, the makeshift rag—a flannel torn off in the escape—showed wine-red. He breathed deep, short. Adrenaline held him up like a plank. But every plank has splinters.

He crossed the bridge to Girón with that familiar mix of vertigo and relief bridges always gave him: they're the exact spot where death likes to watch the ones who slip away. On the curve, faded tiles of a Virgin guarded a niche. "Watch over me," he muttered,

and it tasted like iron.

He wasn't going to reach Barranca bleeding out. Not tonight. Not with two death sentences hanging over him like scorpions: Dr. Schwerter's for the wounded son; Cifuentes' for the disobeyed order. He needed to stop. Not to hide. To do what he had learned in backroads and motels: living is a technique.

He backed into an alley in a low-rent neighborhood—the kind that exists only for urgent needs. He killed the engine, let the motor stay hot for two breaths, and opened the glovebox. The black magnetic box was where it should be. He didn't keep papers there—papers incriminate. He kept the kit every war dog learns to carry when the world is nothing but checkpoints and life is just paperwork.

He dumped it onto the passenger seat. The inventory told his own story: cloth tape, sterile gauze, elastic bandages, a 10 ml syringe, 2% lidocaine with epinephrine, chlorhexidine, rubber tourniquet, butterfly closures, a tiny vial of cyanoacrylate, a packet of hemostatic powder, black nitrile gloves, an ibuprofen tablet, a 500 mg amoxicillin, and the merciful ampoule of diclofenac some unscrupulous doctor had sold him like a little saint.

He turned on the dome light and probed with two fingers under the crust: entry wound high, lateral; exit wound—yes—smaller, ragged inside. "Dog's luck." The bullet had passed through without falling in love with any major artery. Active bleeding, but contained. The pain was a big dog dragging a chain, banging everything in its path.

He trusted faith: gloves, proximal tourniquet, gentle, just to see the field dry; chlorhexidine—it burned like putting out a fire with gasoline; direct pressure with gauze and, on top, the hemostatic powder, that modern miracle that does in seconds what surgeons do with stitches: tricks the blood with an improvised wall.

He waited, counting silently the way men who've watched detonators count: one, two, three… forty. He loosened the tourniquet. The wound wept less. No night for surgical heroics: nothing stitching in a car. The edges were dirty, the setting cursed. He closed just enough: two butterfly strips on the more obedient lip of skin, a tear of cyanoacrylate on the ends so the devil of sweat

wouldn't spit out his work, and on top, a compressive wrap, tight, rural-ambulance school.

He infiltrated superficial lidocaine around it, just enough to take the edge off the pain, and swallowed the amoxicillin like swallowing a promise. He jabbed the diclofenac into his thigh with the familiarity of someone making the sign of the cross. The world regained its edges.

He smoked a non-cigarette: deep breath, hold, release. He packed everything away. He started the engine. He drove on.

He stuck to the long shadow of a tractor-trailer until the tollbooth. The checkpoint looked asleep: tired cones, rifles slung over shoulders, a lieutenant with the look of someone who had already worked his shift in his head. Window down; the flashlight poked into the cabin like a curious insect.

"Where you coming from?"

"The bridge, lieutenant."

"Where you headed?"

"Barranca."

"What happened to your arm?"

"A dog bit me on the farm."

The light lingered on the bandage, hesitated a second, and moved on.

"Keep going."

"Thank you."

He kept going. The country kept going.

On the straightaway to Lebrija, with the night dripping over the sugarcane like black molasses, memories climbed into the car without asking for a seat.

Whenever someone asked about his gold tooth he gave evasive answers: "A whim," "I like how it shines," "So I remember money is temporary." But the truth was much darker, much more complicated, and stained with blood no Catatumbo river could ever wash away.

The truth had a name: Nohora Valentina Sánchez, the woman with the bomb collar.

It was August 2003 when Riakola—then known as Ricardo Andrés Kolashnikov—arrived in Tibú in the back of a banana

truck hiding crates of ammunition. He was twenty-three, with a fresh scar on his abdomen from a brawl in Cúcuta, and a ravenous hunger to prove to the world he was somebody.

Back then the Catatumbo was no-man's-land and everybody's at once. The FARC controlled the villages, the ELN fought them for smuggling routes, the paramilitaries made bloody incursions every two months, and in the middle of all that chaos, the narcos moved their merchandise like ghosts, paying whoever they had to, killing whoever got in the way.

Tibú was a town of dirt roads where dust turned to mud depending on the sky's mood, where wooden houses stood precarious on stilts to avoid river floods, where men spoke in whispers and women only went out when absolutely necessary. It was a place where Colombian law was just a distant rumor.

Riakola arrived with a letter of introduction from "Gordo" Aristizábal. He was received by "Patrón" Cifuentes in a cantina that smelled of stale aguardiente and sweat.

"What can you do, kid?" he asked without preamble.

"Whatever's necessary," Riakola answered.

"Kill?"

"If required."

"Transport?"

"Yes."

"Negotiate?"

Riakola hesitated.

"I can learn."

Cifuentes smiled, showing teeth stained with coffee and tobacco.

"I like you. You're honest. Most of the idiots who show up here think they're Rambo or Pablo Escobar. You at least know you don't know. That might get you out of here alive."

For three weeks Riakola did small jobs. He learned fast that in the Catatumbo there were unwritten but absolute rules:

1. Never ask who you're really working for.
2. Never talk about a job after it's done.
3. Never, under any circumstances, betray a boss.
4. And above all: never get emotionally involved.

The fourth rule would be the one Riakola broke, with consequences that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

In September, Cifuentes called him to his office.

"I have a big job for you," he said. "It'll leave you fifty million pesos. But it's delicate. Very delicate."

Fifty million in 2003 was a fortune.

"What do I have to do?"

Cifuentes lit a black-tobacco cigarette.

"There's a woman. A contractor like you. Name's Nohora Valentina Sánchez. Thirty-two years old, two kids, husband dead three years ago from an Army stray bullet. Smart—too smart for her own good."

"And?"

"She was doing the same as you: transports, messages, sometimes coordinating routes for mobile labs. The FARC's 33rd Front used her a lot because she was discreet and efficient. But two months ago she committed a serious offense."

Cifuentes showed him a photograph. Oval face, brown skin, black hair in a ponytail, intense eyes staring straight at the camera with a mix of defiance and exhaustion.

"What did she do?"

"She stole money. Five hundred million pesos she was supposed to deliver at a border point with Venezuela. Cocaine shipment money headed for distribution networks in Maracaibo."

Riakola whistled.

"That's… a fortune."

"Money that belonged to Commander 'Jerónimo' of the Catatumbo Bloc. And 'Jerónimo' isn't a man who forgives. But there's a problem: she hid the money and won't say where. We have her held at a farm near Petrolea, we're pressuring her, but she won't talk."

"And what do I have to do with it?"

Cifuentes took a long drag.

"You're going to make her talk."

The farm was two hours from Tibú down a trail that barely deserved the name road. The operation commander was "Martín," a guerrilla about thirty-five, thin, patchy beard, a scar crossing his

left cheek.

"Cifuentes says you're good at convincing people," Martín said as he led him to the house. "Well, you're going to need more than that. This bitch is tough. Ten days here and she hasn't cracked."

They entered the house. In the center of the main room, tied to a chair with ropes that cut circulation at her wrists, was Nohora Valentina Sánchez.

The photograph hadn't done her justice. Despite ten days in captivity, despite deep circles under her eyes, split lips, tangled hair, and dirty clothes, there was something about her that radiated unbreakable dignity. Her eyes locked on Riakola with a mix of curiosity and contempt.

"Another lapdog?" she asked in a hoarse voice. "How many is that now? Five? Six?"

"She's all yours," Martín said. "Three days. If she doesn't talk by then, Commander 'Jerónimo' comes personally. And trust me, you don't want to see what he does."

Martín left, leaving them alone. Riakola pulled up a chair and sat across from her, studying her. Nohora didn't look away.

"I'm not going to tell you where the money is," she said. "You can rape me if you want, like the others."

"Why did you do it?" Riakola asked. "You had to know they'd find you."

For the first time something seemed to crack in her expression. Her eyes welled up, though she didn't cry.

"Because that money wasn't for drugs. It was to buy weapons for a massacre in my hometown, San Pablo. There was a list of thirty-two names. Teachers, community leaders, even the parish priest. Good people. People who've only tried to survive in this hell."

"And you believe that because…?"

"Because my name was on the list too. And my two children's names: Sebastián, eleven, and Carolina, eight."

Riakola felt something cold crawl up his spine.

"Why would they want to kill you?"

"Because I saw something I shouldn't have. Six months ago, when they still trusted me, I did a transport from Tibú to Puerto

Santander. The truck had twenty people. I thought they were displaced, that we were helping them cross the border. They weren't displaced—they were Army collaborators. Infiltrators. They were taking them to a mass grave near the Tarra River."

She paused, voice breaking.

"They killed them all. All twenty. I watched them shoot them in the back of the head one by one. There were children. A little girl no older than five. She was crying for her mommy. They shot her anyway."

"And why didn't they kill you right there?"

"Because I was still useful. Because 'Jerónimo' is pragmatic. But after that I started investigating. Asking questions. Putting names together. And I discovered San Pablo was next. So I stole the money. Not to keep it. To stop them."

For three days Riakola talked to Nohora. At first doing his job, but something changed. Maybe it was the way she spoke of her children, with that mix of desperate love and guilt. Maybe it was the weariness in her voice when she described the horrors she had witnessed.

On the night of the third day, Martín entered the room carrying something. It was a bomb collar. A crude but effective device: C-4 molded around a metal ring, wired to a digital timer and a pressure trigger.

"Time's up," Martín said. "Commander 'Jerónimo' ordered this."

"No," Riakola said instinctively.

Martín looked at him with cold eyes.

"I'm not asking. Those are orders. Either she tells where the money is, or we send her back to San Pablo wearing this. And when it blows, the whole town will see what happens to traitors."

"That's… insane. Innocent civilians will die."

"That's the point."

Nohora, who had stayed silent during the exchange, finally spoke:

"Do it. Put it on me. I've already decided not to talk."

Martín smiled.

"How brave. Let's see if you're still brave when you hear the

ticking!"

With the guard's help, Martín fastened the collar around Nohora's neck. The device closed with an ominous metallic click. The timer read 72:00:00.

Seventy-two hours.

"You have three days," Martín said. "Plenty of time to decide if you want to live or blow into a thousand pieces. And just in case you think about being heroic and staying quiet: we're sending you to San Pablo with that collar on. When it explodes, you'll take your family and everyone nearby with you. Still feel brave?"

Nohora paled. For the first time, real terror showed in her eyes.

"Go to hell!" she spat.

"Tomorrow you leave for San Pablo," Martín said. "Riakola, you'll escort her. Make sure she arrives alive. At least until the clock hits zero."

The journey began at dawn. Riakola drove a battered Toyota pickup down Catatumbo backroads, Nohora in the passenger seat, the bomb collar gleaming sinister under the morning sun. The timer read 68:23:15 and counting.

The first thirty minutes passed in silence.

"Do you have children?" Nohora asked suddenly.

Riakola nearly jumped.

"No," he answered.

"Lucky you. Children are a weakness. They make you vulnerable. They force you to make stupid decisions."

"Like stealing five hundred million pesos."

She smiled bitterly.

"Like stealing stashes that rot in barrels buried by the river."

They passed through a small town called El Tarra.

"Do you know every killer carries a demon that protects him?" Nohora said. "I think everyone in this country is already dead. Some just don't know it yet. We're born condemned, grow up amid torture, and die victims of our own actions. There's no escape. No redemption. Just different ways to die."

"I'm not that bitter."

"I'm realistic."

The timer read 67:15:43.

"Where did you hide the money?" Riakola asked.

"Why? Going to try to convince me again?"

"Everyone wants to be rich."

Nohora studied him.

"In a place no one will find it. A place where, if I die, it will rot until it turns to compost. Half a million dollars means nothing in the grand scheme. But at least I'll have done something. I'll have stopped a massacre, even if only temporarily."

"Temporarily?"

"Because they'll get the money from another stash. And then they'll massacre people anyway. Maybe not in San Pablo, but in another town. And another thirty-two people will die. Or sixty-four. Or a hundred and twenty-eight. The numbers change, but the result is the same."

"I'm going to die too," Riakola shrugged.

They reached an Army checkpoint at the entrance to San Pablo around noon. A young lieutenant approached the window.

"Documents," he ordered.

Riakola handed over his ID. The lieutenant checked it and then looked at Nohora. His eyes stopped on the collar.

"What's that?"

"A necklace," Nohora answered calmly. "A gift from my late lover."

The lieutenant frowned. He knew she was one of the many guerrilla deserters on their way to execution.

"Move along," he said finally, stepping back.

They reached San Pablo when the timer read 63:47:22. Riakola parked the pickup in front of a small grocery store. His orders were clear: leave Nohora at her sister's house and wait for the collar to detonate.

"Her house is two blocks away," Riakola said. "Your sister's."

"I know. I grew up here."

They sat in the pickup. Neither moved.

"Why don't you leave?" Nohora asked. "You've done your job. You brought me here. You can go, collect your money, forget all this."

"I don't know if I can."

"Why not?"

Riakola looked at the town through the windshield: kids playing soccer in the street, women chatting on corners, an ordinary world that in sixty-three hours would cease to exist for these people.

"Because this is wrong," he said finally.

Nohora looked at him with something that might have been pity.

"Then leave the Catatumbo. Get on the Darién train and emigrate from Colombia if you can. Because here, anyone who starts asking questions like that gets eaten alive. Like they ate me. Like they'll eat my children."

"And you? You're going to walk into that house knowing you're going to die?"

"I have no choice."

"No one's forcing you."

"If I try to run, they'll find me and kill me. If I take off the collar, I explode. If I tell them where the money is, they'll kill me anyway. At least this way, dying, I spare them the anguish of being dragged to the square and shot in the back of the head."

The timer read 63:12:08.

Riakola spat on the ground and made a decision—undoubtedly stupid, suicidal—that would violate every rule he had learned in the Catatumbo.

"I'm going to get that collar off you," he said.

Nohora looked at him like he had lost his mind.

"What? No. It's impossible. It's designed to explode if you tamper with it."

"I know someone not far from here. An explosives technician. They call him 'The Watchmaker.' If anyone can disarm that collar, it's him."

"And why would you do that? Why risk your life for me?"

Riakola had no rational answer.

"Because I liked you," he answered.

They spent the next hours contacting and waiting for The Watchmaker—after agreeing to his fee; even heroism has a price.

The Watchmaker was a man of about forty, bald, thick glasses, surgeon's hands. He examined the collar with a small flashlight.

"Work of Alfredo 'El Cachaco' Méndez," he said. "I recognize his style. Two detonation mechanisms: one for tampering, one for timer. And probably a third by remote signal, just in case. It's complicated."

"Can you disarm it?"

The Watchmaker took off his glasses and cleaned them with a handkerchief.

"I can. But if I'm wrong, we all blow up. And pieces of us will reach Venezuela."

"How much did you say you charge?"

"Ten million pesos."

"I'll give you five now and five when you're done."

"Deal."

The process took six hours. Six hours during which Riakola sweated more than in his entire life. Nohora stayed perfectly still, barely breathing. The Watchmaker worked with microscopic precision.

When the timer read 54:17:33, The Watchmaker cut the last wire.

The collar opened with a soft click.

The three of them let out the breath they had been holding.

"Done," The Watchmaker said. "You can take it off now."

Nohora removed the collar with trembling hands. She held it for a moment, staring at it like a strange object. Then she threw it to the floor.

"Thank you," she whispered, tears running down her cheeks. "Thank you."

The Watchmaker handed Riakola a homemade remote detonator.

"You show them the destroyed shell. They'll believe you."

Riakola paid him. The Watchmaker vanished into the night.

"I'll deposit the ten million in your account," Nohora promised.

"I know you will."

"And now what?" Nohora asked.

"Now you leave. Get out of Colombia. Venezuela, Ecuador, anywhere. But you can't stay. When they find out you're alive,

they'll come for you."

"And you?"

"I have to go back to Tibú. I have to report an… accident. That the collar went off early. That you died. I have to sell them that story."

"They'll kill you when they find out the truth."

"Probably. But at least you, beautiful, will be alive. That counts for something. Besides, I know when to switch sides."

"First you should claim an advance."

They rented a room and made love furiously all night.

Riakola returned to Tibú three days later. He brought the disarmed collar, which he had detonated by remote in an open field to create evidence. He also brought photos of the remains.

Martín received him with suspicion.

"What happened?"

"It went off early," Riakola answered in a neutral voice. "We were on the outskirts of San Pablo when the timer started speeding up. A defect in the mechanism. She panicked, tried to take it off, and it detonated. I was far enough away to avoid injury."

"And the body?"

"Pieces. Very small. I collected what I could."

Martín studied his face, looking for signs of a lie. Riakola held his gaze.

A week of interrogations followed, but eventually they let him go.

Cifuentes paid him his fifty million pesos.

"Good work," he said. "Shame we couldn't recover the money. But at least the traitor is dead. That sends a message."

Riakola took the money and went to Cúcuta. In a shady dental clinic he had a gold molar made. It cost him three million pesos.

"Why gold?" the dentist asked. "Gold's out of fashion."

"I want gold," Riakola insisted.

When the dentist finished, Riakola looked in the mirror. The molar gleamed in his mouth like an accusation, like a reminder.

Every time he ate, every time he spoke, every time he smiled, he would feel that tooth. Heavy. Strange. Permanent.

That was exactly what he wanted.

A reminder of Nohora Valentina Sánchez. Of the woman who had preferred to die rather than betray her people. Of the woman he had saved, breaking every rule, so she would be his for one night.

A reminder that, for once in his miserable life, he had been a gentleman.

But seductions in the Catatumbo never go unpunished.

Two months later, Martín turned up dead in a ditch near Tibú. The FARC accused him of treason. Cifuentes also disappeared. His body was never found.

Riakola knew then his time in Tibú was over. He packed what little he had and went to Bucaramanga, where he used part of the remaining money as a bond to be accepted into Dr. Schwerter's organization.

Six months passed before Riakola received the message.

It was a postcard sent from Quito, Ecuador. No return address, just a photograph of Plaza Grande and, on the back, written in small, careful handwriting, two sentences:

"Sebastián is in university. Carolina wants to be a doctor. Thank you for giving them a future."

Below, an initial: N.

Riakola burned the postcard immediately. But those words stayed burned into his memory.

For the next two years Riakola lived in constant paranoia. He learned that "Jerónimo" had ordered a thorough investigation. They found out he had rented a room with a woman for one night.

Riakola was now on their list.

The gold tooth became something that reproached him: *This is the price of lust. This is the cost of saving lives for the secretion of a few fluids in a traitor.*

He started drinking more. Snorting coke to stay alert. Sleeping with the pistol under his pillow.

Paranoia ate at him like acid.

In October 2005, two years after the incident, the case hit national news. Riakola saw it on a newscast. The report showed blurry photos of Nohora, interviews with neighbors, speculation. All presented as morbid entertainment.

No one mentioned the children now living in Ecuador. No one mentioned the price paid by those who helped.

Just scandal. Morbid curiosity. Blood.

Riakola turned off the TV and touched his gold tooth with his tongue.

Three months later, in January 2006, Cifuentes reappeared.

He wasn't dead. He had fled to Panama, changed identity. And now he was back.

And he knew the truth about Nohora.

The message came through an intermediary: a long-distance photograph of Riakola and The Watchmaker working on the collar.

The message was clear: *I know what you did. And if I know, others might too.*

The blackmail began subtly. Cifuentes asked for favors. Small at first, but they grew more dangerous. Riakola became an unwilling traitor.

The irony wasn't lost on him: he had saved Nohora because he wanted to sleep with her, because he had found her disdain for the rapes that terrified other women irresistible. That's why their night of passion had been brutal, without rules or prohibitions.

Her feminine charm had turned him into a snitch, a traitor.

The gold tooth was no longer just heavy. It hurt.

The following months were a nightmare, barely eased by his new romance with Marianne, the French woman he had met at a cocktail party.

That affair excused the mistakes he began to make. Small at first: arriving late to meetings, miscalculating.

Joel Schwerter and his father were not fools. They began to notice.

"You okay?" Joel asked him. "You look… different. Tired."

"I'm fine," Riakola lied. "Just sleeping badly lately."

But he wasn't fine. He was falling apart.

He increased his cocaine use. His nose bled constantly. He lost weight. His eyes sank.

One-Eye Juan found him one night passed out in his apartment bathroom, nose covered in white powder.

"Brother, you're killing yourself," Juan told him. "Whatever's eating you, you have to face it."

But how could he face it? How could he admit that his only good deed had become a curse?

In August 2006, Cifuentes showed up in person.

They met in a roadside motel near Girón.

Cifuentes had aged. His bald head gleamed under the fluorescent light, his mustache completely gray, and he had developed a persistent cough.

"It's over," Cifuentes said without preamble. "I don't need your information anymore."

Riakola felt a moment of relief, immediately followed by terror.

"But now we have another problem," Cifuentes continued. "Dr. Schwerter is interfering with our operations. His son Joel specifically is blocking a route we need in Barrancabermeja. We have a fifty-kilo shipment that has to go through, and he's not cooperating."

"And?"

"And I need you to fix it."

"What does 'fix it' mean?"

Cifuentes lit a cigarette.

"It means you convince him to step aside. Or you make him step aside yourself."

"You're asking me to kill Joel?"

"I'm not asking. I'm ordering. You do it, or I send the photo I have to the FARC. And when they find out you saved Nohora, that you betrayed them, they'll come for you. And believe me, what I'd do to you is mercy compared to what they'll decide."

"I'm not going to kill Joel."

"Then you'll die with your little French girl."

"I already ended it with her," Riakola lied.

"Your decision."

Cifuentes stood and walked to the door. Before leaving, he stopped and looked at his victim.

"You have one week. Talk to your spirits."

That was how things stood when the glass of the swinging door let in the thick smell of hospital coffee. Those who serve hospital

coffee are priests without robes. They leave the cup where it belongs. They don't ask. They charge. They leave. In that gesture there is a country that could have been and wasn't.

The doctor held the cup as if holding a hot animal. He didn't drink. His mouth was dry for something else.

At that same hour, in a Barranca boarding house that had seen better brooms, the receptionist looked up from the television just long enough to see a big, pale man walk in with a dirty bandage and the gleam of gold insulting the dimness. He asked for a room with bath. Paid in advance. Climbed the stairs as if each step charged him a muscle tax. Closed the door and collapsed on a bed that smelled of cheap detergent and cigarettes put out with cigarettes. Pain in his arm turned up the volume. His head became a film without subtitles. At some point sleep grabbed him by the throat and forced him to confess things only he knew. He dreamed of a collar that weighed and a clock that never rang and a woman who walked away without looking back, and in the dream the gold tooth weighed so much it dragged his face into the pillow.

In Cabecera the sun came up half-heartedly. An elderly lady watered her balcony plants early and muttered a loving reproach at the neighbor's bromeliad that wasn't hers. The building, that concrete animal that had witnessed the night before, yawned with its windows. A neighbor went down to the gym in the right clothes and a purpose that had nothing to do with the night. Another called work to say he'd be late. One started the coffee maker and left the radio on, no volume. Life had plans older than any bullet.

The doctor with watchmaker hands came out again and said for now they had to wait. The phrase *for now* is the thread people hang the day from when there are no nails left. Doña Helena nodded once. Dr. Schwerter stared at a spot on the floor as if reading a Braille map. Sometimes, when everything shakes, all that's left is to make calls that say nothing and give orders that will be carried out even if they make no sense. He knew what to do with every man who ever owed him a hand. He knew which judge not to bother. He knew which reporter to invite to breakfast that week. He knew none of it fixed the bullet in his son's chest. Still he dialed. Still he hung up. Still he saved for later the accounts, the duels, the rosary

of the others.

And the felt table, up there in its suspended kingdom, remained a green island with frozen cards and an ashtray that still said, with its thin wisp of ancient smoke, that in that house the last thing to go out are the vices. The bromeliad, perfect, gave color to the scene as if the scene had been staged for it. Sometime during the day someone would come to remove Pedro's body from a morgue drawer with a tag. They would call him by a name only his mother said softly. Someone would say a couple of lines about what good people he was. Someone would comment on the colors of his clothes with a badly behaved chuckle. A tired cop would fill out a form with blanks that don't allow poetry. He would sign. He would file the paper. He would move on to another dead man who demanded the same paperwork.

If you listen closely, you can hear the click that closes one chapter and opens another. It doesn't sound loud. It sounds like a domino tile falling on a poorly polished table. That morning it sounded. No one knew where it came from. Some mistook it for an elevator. Others for another gunshot. For Joel it was just air. For Dr. Schwerter it was a list that began writing itself. For Riakola it was the cheap boarding-house alarm clock without music. For Juan it was the certainty that men who survive certain nights never sleep straight through again.

The city, as always, put on its clean shirt and went out to collect. Because cities collect too. They collect time, scares, silences. And sometimes, when they feel like being petty, they collect with interest. That morning Bucaramanga had the humor of an accountant. And the balance, though it wasn't written anywhere, had already tipped to the side that always wins. Not the saints'. Not the living's. Not the dead's. Memory's. The one that never forgives and that, when it feels like it, bites with gold teeth.

10. *The Mistress's Trap*

Ariadna organized her belongings, turned off the office light, sat in her armchair facing the palm trees in the park, and felt a growing desire to possess Hernando, no longer for the simple desire that had driven her weeks ago—that hunger for novelty, that longing to feel alive—but for something darker, denser: the need to control what was slipping away from her.

That impulse, as she settled into the armchair, no longer presented itself as a simple erotic whim, but as a kind of ontological revenge: if life had denied her the power to be the protagonist of her own existence, at least she could cling to the power to ruin someone else's.

She had read enough Schopenhauer to know that human will is insatiable, that desire is never satisfied but simply changes objects. And now her object was not pleasure, but power. Hernando had denied her, had chosen the French woman over her, and that—that choice—gnawed at her like acid. Not because she loved him, she understood with sudden clarity, but because his rejection was a mirror that reflected an unbearable image: that of a forty-year-old woman who was no longer the first choice, who could no longer compete with the youth and novelty of Marianne.

She understood, with an almost cruel lucidity, that what hurt her was not the loss of a lover, but the realization that she had become "the other option," the comfortable but replaceable woman, the warm refuge that is abandoned as soon as a brighter horizon appears. That awareness ignited in her a wounded pride that, far from softening her, sharpened her decisions.

His opinions about the history of the United States had initially excited her, as that was the field of her greatest interest, undoubtedly due to her parents' deep-seated admiration for the superpower. She remembered the day Hernando had explained to her the reasons why the United States would never be progressive or communist:

"It's a federal government," he replied with that superior smile that earned him so many enemies, "where each municipality respects its own opinion, which they believe is superior to that of their neighbors; that presumption leads them to excellence. Communism requires obedience to a central power, whether it's the Politburo or the Castro family."

That speech, back then, had seemed not only brilliant but seductive. She had felt that finally someone was speaking to her on a level that surpassed society gossip and the trivial conversations at cocktails. That Hernando who cited government systems and analyzed history with ease had been her antidote against the mediocrity surrounding her.

At that moment, she had found him brilliant. Now, in retrospect, she saw in that smile the same arrogance that had excluded her. He believed himself superior—intellectually, morally—and that superiority allowed him to judge her, abandon her, choose another.

And yet, as she weighed that memory, she couldn't help but recognize that therein lay part of his charm: men like that, convinced of their own worth, were odious when they became judges, but irresistible when they deigned to share their world with one. Hernando, by elevating himself above others, had made her believe for an instant that by choosing her, he placed her at his same height. That's why his abandonment hurt so much: not only did she lose him, she lost herself in that idealized image.

"Well, I can choose too," she thought with a coldness that surprised even her. "I can choose to destroy him."

She didn't think of it as an impulsive reaction, but as a settling of scores with the universe: if she couldn't write her own life in the key of fulfillment, she would at least write it in the key of someone else's tragedy. If she couldn't be Phaedra loved, she would be Phaedra the destroyer.

She dialed his cell number and was directed to voicemail. She hung up. Her eyes fell on the wall clock: twelve fifteen. She advanced imperturbably toward the desk of the cause of her spite.

She opened a drawer and extracted from it the bottle of whiskey she had given him days ago. She held it for a moment, observing

how the park light refracted in the amber liquid. She thought of Medea, of how spite had transformed her from princess to filicide. She thought of Clytemnestra weaving the purple net for her husband. She thought of all the betrayed women in literature who had taken revenge, and how history had called them monsters while celebrating male betrayals as epic.

The gallery of those figures presented itself to her as a silent tribunal: Medea, Clytemnestra, Phaedra, even Emma Bovary, even Anna Karenina, all thrown into the abyss of moral judgment while men were remembered for their "passion" or their "genius." She, Ariadna, saw herself aligning in that genealogy of women punished for not meekly accepting their role as victims.

"But I'm not a monster," she told herself. "I'm just a woman who returns the blow."

That nuance was essential for her: she didn't see herself as a villain, but as a settler of scores, one who equated the inflicted humiliation with a humiliation in return.

She looked around to make sure she was alone, and headed toward the bathroom, where she opened the faucet of a sink. She poured the contents of the whiskey bottle, with an impassive gaze, into the stream of water. She watched it disappear down the drain and felt an almost sexual satisfaction, as if she were pouring not whiskey but the symbolic blood of her enemy.

The metaphor of blood excited and frightened her at the same time: one part of herself knew she was exaggerating, that it was just alcohol; another part perceived in that act a declaration of war, a point of no return that linked her to the tragic heroines she secretly admired.

Hours later, Hernando feverishly sketched an architectural plan before his eyes. He was absorbed in the lines, the angles, in that geometry that had always consoled him when emotional chaos threatened to devour him. Architecture was order, structure, predictability—everything his love life was not.

In each stroke, he found refuge against the anarchy of his desires: well-calculated walls against poorly managed impulses, firm columns against brittle loyalties. He would have liked for his biography to be correctable with squares and compasses, but he

knew that affections weren't governed by rules of statics.

Ariadna watched him smiling from the window of Ramiro's office. She observed him as a hunter observes prey seconds before the final shot. She remembered the play she had starred in during her adolescence at San Pedro Claver School: Racine's Phèdre, the original French version under the direction of a classmate.

Back then, at barely sixteen, she had felt for the first time the vertigo of embodying a woman dragged by an illicit passion. The text wasn't just a script, but a mute prophecy that now, decades later, she saw fulfilled.

Then she had played the incestuous stepmother, consumed by a forbidden passion that destroyed her from within. She had recited those verses with an intensity that scared her classmates: "Ce n'est plus une ardeur dans mes veines cachée: c'est Vénus tout entière à sa proie attachée." "It's no longer a hidden ardor in my veins: it's Venus entire attached to her prey."

Those words, years ago, had sounded to her like baroque exaggeration; today they seemed a clinical description of her own fever of possession. She wasn't in love, she told herself, but furious like Hera before Paris for preferring Aphrodite, stuck like a limpet to a man who was slipping away.

Now she understood Phaedra in a way her teenage self couldn't. She understood how rejected desire turned into hate, how unrequited love fermented into poison. Phaedra had falsely accused Hippolytus of raping her, causing his death. And although Ariadna didn't plan to go that far, she knew that what she was about to do was equally irreversible.

She also knew that, like Phaedra, she was willing to sacrifice her own image just to not remain as the silently abandoned one. Better to be remembered as dangerous than forgotten as harmless.

She recalled that oriental epigram she had once read prescribing that nothing was casual in her life: the plot of the disillusioned matron unfolded before her eyes, with her as the protagonist, like the thread from the spool that long ago she had released, to the misfortune of Medea, for the daring Jason. And she recited mentally, like a spell, those verses from Racine that she had memorized decades ago:

Bitter sorrow That I had not yet tasted. To what new and horrible torment was I reserved? How much I have suffered until now: my spites, my fears, the lively and voracious flame of my furious incendiary desires; the horror of my remorse, and with a cruel negative the unbearable insult are but a weak test of the torment I suffer.

Yes, she thought. This was exactly what she felt. And if Phaedra had had the courage to destroy what she couldn't possess, she would have it too.

In her mind, she didn't see herself as a simple spurned secretary, but as a tragic heroine in her climactic moment, justifying her acts under the alibi of exceptional suffering.

The clock struck one forty-five. The chair in front of Hernando's desk remained empty; on his desk, a ceramic hand with pencils seemed to be asking for help—an irony that didn't go unnoticed by Ariadna, who smiled bitterly.

The ceramic hand, with its clenched fingers holding pens, suddenly seemed to her a small sculpture of Hernando himself: useful, creative, but trapped in a gesture that would repeat itself to exhaustion.

From the door of Ramiro's office, a voice was heard. The door to his office opened suddenly; a two-meter figure advanced in long strides toward the desk.

Ariadna followed him, composing her face into a mask of professional concern.

"You can't fire him now!" she argued with deep hypocrisy, marveling at the histrionic character her humanity allowed her.

As she spoke, she almost admired her own ability to change registers: from spurned lover to exemplary assistant in a matter of seconds. That ductility was her curse, but also her weapon.

"How easy it is to lie," she thought, "when you've spent twenty years faking orgasms and domestic happiness."

The two decades of marriage to Emeterio had been an involuntary acting school: smiles at dinners, compliments at gatherings, calculated silences on business trips. That learning was now put at the service of her revenge.

Ramiro stopped in front of Hernando's desk and opened his

drawers one by one, with the efficiency of an inquisitor who knows exactly where he will find the heresy.

"Which drawer?"

"I can't tell you," Ariadna sobbed, and the tears were real, though not for the reasons Ramiro assumed. She was crying for herself, for the woman she could have been and never was, for the paths not taken that were now closing definitively.

"If you don't, I'll fire you," Ramiro threatened her.

And there it was: the ultimatum. She had to choose between her job—which she didn't need economically but psychologically, as an escape from her dead marriage—and her revenge. The choice was instantaneous.

"The second one on the right."

Ramiro opened it and found the already empty whiskey bottle. He lifted it as evidence, and Ariadna felt a dark satisfaction seeing how the trap closed on her prey.

That piece of glass was proof that she could still alter the course of the life of a man who had believed himself beyond her reach.

But then Ramiro opened another drawer and pulled out a black USB drive, small, almost invisible among the pencils and erasers.

"And what's this?" he asked, connecting it to the computer.

Ariadna paled. She had recorded the conversation and the encounter with Hernando at her house, using the cell phone hidden in her purse. But in the euphoria of revenge, she had left it forgotten in the office, in the second drawer, next to the empty bottle. A stupid, unforgivable oversight.

The recording began to play: the gasps, the moans, Ariadna's voice saying "I'm a whore... I love putting horns on him...". Everything was there, crystal clear.

Ramiro looked at her with a mixture of disgust and disappointment.

"This changes everything," he said simply.

Ariadna felt the ground open beneath her feet. Her perfect trap had turned against her due to a beginner's mistake. The Phaedra she believed herself to be had become the clumsy conspirator who gets entangled in her own net.

Hernando knocked insistently on Ariadna's house door, with a

fury he hadn't felt since his adolescence, when Riakola humiliated him at school. But this time he wouldn't be the defenseless victim. Now he had words, arguments, the ability to defend himself that he lacked back then.

In his rage, however, he perceived a deeper shade of disappointment: not only had he been unjustly accused, he had been betrayed by someone he had believed capable of tenderness.

Elcira opened the solid oak door, and her face reflected a mixture of disapproval and something like pity.

"Hello Elcira..."

"Craving another four hours of swimming?" the maid asked with a sarcasm that poorly hid her genuine concern. "I know you already feel entitled to come and go as you please in this home."

"Who is it?" Ariadna asked from behind her.

Hernando forced the door and entered the house, overcoming Elcira's pressure, who barely grumbled. There was something theatrical in his irruption, something that made him feel ridiculous even as he did it, but the anger was stronger than self-awareness.

In the living room, Ariadna was playing solitaire with cards, an image so domestic and calm that it increased Hernando's fury. How could she be so calm after what she had done?

The contrast between the calm of the cards and the chaos in his professional life seemed almost insulting, as if she had shuffled his entire existence with the same lightness with which she dealt cards on the table.

Elcira stammered agitatedly:

"Do you want me to call the guard?"

"Hernando!" Ariadna smiled, patting her left buttock, a casual gesture of possession that enraged him even more. "It's almost midnight. No need, Elcira. Check if the girls woke up."

"They didn't hear the doorbell from their rooms."

"Anyway," Ariadna replied, "go and make sure."

Elcira withdrew, observing Hernando like a guard dog whose owners pull it away from its prey, and in her gaze there was a warning he couldn't read.

"Why did you empty the whiskey bottle?"

"Me?" Ariadna smiled, unable to contain her malicious

pleasure. "What are you talking about?"

And at that moment, Hernando understood something fundamental about human nature that all his years of reading hadn't taught him: that resentment is more powerful than love, that spite transforms people into unrecognizable versions of themselves, that Ariadna—the woman who had sobbed in his arms talking about her frustrated dreams—was now his mortal enemy.

He felt, like a bitter revelation, that the library of his life—full of philosophers, novelists, tragedians—hadn't prepared him for the experience of being the direct target of someone's spite whom he had wanted to console.

"Do you know the story of Abelard and Heloise?" Hernando said, sitting on the edge of the main sofa, adopting the pedagogical tone he used when he wanted to establish emotional distance through intellect. "From that expression, I know you don't. I'll tell it to you."

It was a mistake, he knew it even as he spoke. He was trying to reason with someone who had left reason behind, citing medieval history to someone operating from primal passions. But he couldn't stop, because words were his only weapon.

"Abelard was the most famous man of his generation, around the beginning of the 12th century. Teacher at the most prestigious university in Paris, he taught philosophy and theology. He was a monk in an era when being a monk was less scandalous than now. He wasn't a saint, but he aspired to be. But being wise and holy was the maximum his contemporaries could admit, as Saint Thomas Aquinas would demonstrate centuries later. Abelard, deep down, longed to find a woman who loved his intellect, and he found her in the nun Heloise."

He paused, observing Ariadna's face, looking for some sign of understanding, of regret. There was none.

As he spoke of Abelard, he perceived, unwillingly, the analogy between the castrated philosopher by the hatred of his contemporaries and himself subjected to the moral lynching of a small office, but governed by the same minimal passions.

"The wrath of his generation was then unleashed against him. Being wise, holy, and seductive was an offense to those who

studied half-heartedly, fell into sin, and were seductive by virtue of their properties or social position. His fall, therefore, was forged by his jealous students. Abelard was accused, tried, and castrated. Those who denounced him wrote anonymous letters telling him he was a failure. Abelard didn't respond to them. He assumed his tragedy and died in obscurity."

"And what's the moral?" Ariadna asked with a coldness that chilled his blood.

"Those who envy actually wish to determine the fate of others," Hernando replied with sparkling eyes. "It's not that you love me; you envy me."

The accusation floated between them like gunpowder smoke. For a moment, Ariadna seemed hurt, vulnerable. But the vulnerability lasted only a second before being replaced by something harder, more dangerous.

"Ah!" Ariadna nodded, caressing her voluminous breasts with arrogance, a deliberately provocative gesture. "So Ramiro decided to fire you?"

"You set a trap for me."

Ariadna took off her t-shirt, showing her erect nipples, and Hernando felt his body betray his mind, responding to the visual stimulus despite his anger.

The contradiction was brutal: while his mind listed reasons to detest her, his body behaved as if those two decades of accumulated desire—his own and others'—were concentrated in that instant.

"I could intervene on your behalf," she said, caressing herself, "if that's what you want. I feel like I'm wet, darling."

"This is Circe," Hernando thought, recalling the Odyssey. "This is the sorceress who turns men into pigs. And I'm about to drink from her cup."

By evoking Circe, he saw the scene crudely: himself as one more of Ulysses' sailors, transformed into a beast by the charm of a wounded woman who, to not suffer alone, needed to drag him back to her bed and her ruin.

"Tell him it was you who gave me the bottle," Hernando said, trying to maintain control, knowing he was losing it.

"Anything else?"

Seduced by her breasts, by the memory of her flesh, by that animal part of himself that obeyed no Kantian categorical imperative, Hernando kissed her furiously.

As his lips sank into hers, he felt an anticipated shame, that awareness that he was manufacturing the scene he would reproach himself for years later.

"You want to make love to me, right?" Ariadna asked, and in her voice there was triumph. "That's what all men want with me. That's why you came."

And she was right. Despite everything—her betrayal, her evil, her revenge—he desired her. Not because he loved her, but because sexual desire is independent of moral judgment, because the body has its own logic that has nothing to do with ethics.

The realization of that independence humiliated him: so many books, so much philosophy, so much music, and in the end, the body followed its own laws, indifferent to his value system.

Hernando made love to her with force, with rage, with a mixture of pleasure and self-loathing. It was violent in a way he had never been with Marianne, as if he were punishing her and punishing himself simultaneously. And when he ejaculated, he felt not relief but disgust—for her, for himself, for the whole situation.

He threw her onto the divan with more force than necessary.

Ariadna laughed, a sound that would haunt him in his nightmares, a laugh of pleasure, but above all, of victory. She had had him one last time, had proven that she could still control him, that his body belonged to her even if his heart didn't.

Hernando reached the door and fled from whom he now considered his enemy, his clothes half-on, his dignity in tatters.

"I'll regret it in years to come," he told himself as he descended the stairs two at a time, fleeing the scene of his humiliation.

But alongside that thought, another opened, more tenuous: the suspicion that, precisely because of that fall, he would better understand what it meant to love without demanding illusions of purity; that only by recognizing his misery could he aspire to a more honest form of love with Marianne.

Seated in a cast aluminum chair on Marianne's terrace,

Hernando received a cup of coffee. The aroma reminded him of mornings with Nancy, afternoons with Ariadna, all the women who had passed through his life leaving scars that overlapped like palimpsests.

But this time he perceived something new: the possibility that those scars, far from invalidating him as a lover, were precisely what made him worthy of being loved by someone who knew, from the beginning, his fractures.

Marianne sat next to him, and there was something in her presence that calmed him. It wasn't Nancy's drama nor Ariadna's devouring intensity, but a serenity that came from knowing herself, from not needing male validation to exist.

That serenity, however, didn't make her less intense; it only shifted the volcano from external spectacle to internal dialogue, where she allowed herself to think crudely about her desires and contradictions.

She had changed since that first time they met in her music appreciation class. Back then she was the distant professor, the unattainable European. But the weeks with Hernando had transformed her. Not because he had changed her—Marianne wasn't a woman who allowed herself to be molded—but because he had given her permission to be vulnerable, to admit that she too was broken, that she too had fled France not only for adventure but for pain.

The same Marianne who laughed publicly at others' jealousies, in private was capable of recognizing to what extent that Colombian man, with his collection of lovers and failures, attracted her precisely for not presenting himself as an impossible saint.

Her mother had died in that car accident in the snow, yes. But what Marianne had never told anyone was that her mother was going to meet a lover when she lost control of the car. Marianne knew it because she had found the letters, because she had read the text messages on the phone that the police returned along with her personal belongings.

That discovery had taught her a brutal lesson: absolute fidelity was, often, a story told outward, a play for family and neighbors. What happened in intimacy rarely matched the myth of the perfect

couple.

And that had marked her more deeply than the death itself: the discovery that her mother, whom she idealized, was human, fallible, capable of betrayal. She had come to Colombia fleeing that truth, building a new identity in a place where no one knew her story.

That's why, in the most secret part of her mind, Hernando's figure didn't scandalize her: a man with lovers, with intertwined idylls, wasn't for her proof of evil, but confirmation that he wasn't trying to sell her the tale of eternal purity. That involuntary honesty seduced her more than any promise of exclusivity.

But with Hernando, for the first time, she had started to talk about it. Not explicitly—she couldn't yet—but in the nighttime conversations, in the shared silences, she had begun to heal. And that healing process had made her more capable of loving, not with the desperate passion of someone seeking to fill a void, but with the serenity of someone who has made peace with her ghosts.

And in that serenity, an intimate confession mingled that she would never say out loud: the attraction she felt for a man surrounded by stories, lovers, failures, was precisely the attraction for someone who didn't offer himself as a virginal object, but as a being already tested by life. Men "with several women" had for her a shade of danger and experience that made them irresistible, as long as they didn't lie to her about it.

"And you're not thinking of going back to your office?" Marianne asked, pulling him from his thoughts.

"Tomorrow afternoon."

"And the project?" Marianne narrowed her eyes. "Doesn't it have to be presented tomorrow at noon?"

Hernando downed his cup thoughtfully. The coffee was bitter, it needed sugar, but he didn't get up to look for it. The bitterness seemed appropriate for the moment.

"If they want to get rid of me," he said, "there's no reason to finish it."

"Don't let anger interfere with your professional performance."

There was wisdom in those words, Hernando thought. Marianne understood something he was learning painfully: that

revenge is a prison, that clinging to resentment only poisons the one who holds it. She had learned that with her mother's death, had had to forgive a dead woman to be able to keep living.

And as she looked at him, Marianne surprised herself recognizing that that man, with his sentimental chaos, moved her precisely because he didn't hide his past. She didn't need him to be faithful in the conventional sense—she knew, from experience, that those oaths often preceded the worst betrayals; what she wanted was for him to be true with her, not to lie to her about who he was or what he had done.

"What do you advise me?"

"Talk to your boss in the morning. Tell him the truth. And do it in Ariadna's presence."

"What a harpy!" Hernando exclaimed exasperatedly, and simultaneously felt his member harden at the memory of his obsession. The erection shamed him deeply. How could his body still desire her after what she had done?

"How could you get involved with her?" Marianne grumbled, but there was understanding in her tone more than judgment. "Men are stupid. But I'll be honest with you; from what I've heard, you're a good fuck. When that information reaches us, we give ourselves to that man if he courts us. Even if you don't love exclusively, we know the pleasures you give us will be unforgettable."

Marianne, in pronouncing those words, felt she was intellectually undressing herself: she admitted that a man's sexual prestige counted, that the rumor of his prowess in bed acted as secret propaganda among women. She knew it from her friends, from her own stories in Europe, from the men who had passed through her life. And Hernando, with his lovers and crossed stories, inscribed himself in that catalog of "dangerous" men who, precisely because they belonged to no one, were more desirable.

Marianne's frankness disarmed him. It wasn't the reproach he expected, but an admission that she too was human, that she too had chosen to be with him partly for physical reasons, and that didn't invalidate the deeper feelings they had developed.

For Hernando, accustomed to women who masked desire

under romantic words or demands for fidelity, hearing Marianne openly recognize the weight of pleasure was almost a revelation: for the first time, he felt someone looked at him whole, body and soul, without demanding the mask of the "decent" man who never errs.

"I rushed..." Hernando murmured. "I rushed without knowing that I was already arriving at..."

"Yes?"

Hernando raised his gaze to the sky: the moon shone among the clouds, a silver disk that reminded him of the first time he had read Leopardi, the Italian poet who had written to the moon as confidant of his solitude. "Che fai tu, luna, in ciel? dimmi, che fai, silenziosa luna?" "What do you do, moon, in the sky? Tell me, what do you do, silent moon?"

Those verses, which in his youth had seemed the elegant complaint of a melancholic, now acquired a different flavor: he saw himself as that man looking at the distant star seeking some kind of complicity for his amorous errors.

He reviewed in his mind the notes of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, that piece that had always consoled him in his darkest moments. He had played it the night Nancy left him, had played it after the encounter with the prostitutes, played it every time he needed to remind himself that beauty still existed in the world.

He realized, suddenly, that each of those performances had been linked to the illusion of starting over, of becoming someone worthy of clean love. Now, facing Marianne, he suspected that perhaps the error had been aspiring to cleanliness: maybe the only honest way to love was to do it from shared dirt, from the acceptance of mutual ruins.

He lowered his gaze and observed Marianne with tenderness.

"A woman as beautiful as this night."

Marianne looked at him longingly, and in her eyes he saw his own vulnerability reflected.

For an instant, the French woman who had crossed the Atlantic to flee a broken family story felt that she finally found in that man a different mirror: not that of guilt nor of false perfection, but that of someone who, like her, carried his biography like a battered

suitcase and still offered himself to the other.

"Bird that also," he added, recalling a poem he had written years ago, "trembling, suffered."

Hernando kissed her lightly on her lips, and the kiss was different from all he had given before. It wasn't the desperate kiss with Nancy, trying to cling to something already gone, nor the furious kiss with Ariadna, a mixture of desire and resentment; it was a kiss that recognized the fragility of both, that said: "I'm broken too, and it's okay."

As he kissed her, Hernando had an unusual certainty: Marianne didn't love him for an idealized version of himself. She knew about Nancy, intuited Ariadna, suspected or knew other episodes; and still, she chose him. Not despite his infidelities, but with them integrated into the equation. That acceptance moved him more than any oath of eternal love.

Marianne smiled blushing, and Hernando saw in that smile the possibility of redemption. Perhaps he wasn't condemned to repeat the same destructive patterns. Perhaps with Marianne he could build something different, something that wasn't masochistic submission to Nancy nor a power war with Ariadna.

She, for her part, discovered herself fascinated by that mixture of tenderness and chaos in him: a man capable of sleeping with wrong women, yes, but also capable of quoting Leopardi, playing Beethoven, speaking honestly to her about his ruins. And in that mixture, strangely, her desire grew.

They kissed, introducing their being into the other, without Ariadna's jealousy or envy, without Nancy's manipulation. It was a kiss between equals, between two adult people who had suffered and consciously chose to be together not out of necessity but genuine desire.

Marianne allowed herself to formulate, in silence, an intimate confession: Hernando's sentimental polygamy—his lovers, his errors—didn't make him less worthy for her; on the contrary, it made him more real. The terrible thing for her wasn't a man with several lovers, but a man who pretended never to have had them.

Minutes later, scattered throughout the room, on a white rug, lay Hernando and Marianne's clothes.

Marianne's bare foot rose over her bra. Her leg, her hips, and her bare breasts rested on a white leather sofa; she observed Hernando's muscular arms, who at her side, naked, played Moonlight Sonata on the piano.

The music filled the apartment, and Marianne thought of something she had read in Thomas Mann, in The Magic Mountain, about how music was the most direct art form, the one that reached the soul without need for intellectual translation. Hans Castorp had discovered in the Swiss sanatorium that music could heal where words failed, and Marianne felt the same now, listening to Hernando play.

In Mann's novel, illness and suspended time opened the door to a different understanding of life; here, in Bucaramanga, the illness was her memories and the suspended time was that nighttime moment when the world seemed reduced to a piano, a loved body, and a sleeping city below.

He played with his eyes closed, completely absorbed, and she realized this was the first time she saw him truly at peace. With Nancy he had always been tense, trying to be enough. With Ariadna he had been on guard, defending against attacks he couldn't always predict. But here, naked before the piano, with her as the only audience, he could simply be.

That calm, paradoxically, stemmed from there being nothing left to hide: Marianne knew his past enough so that he didn't have to pretend an immaculate sentimental resume. For the first time, he felt loved not for what he promised to be, but for what he really was.

She studied intimate photographs from her past attached to a corkboard hanging on the wall: her on the snow, on skis, with two elderly people—her maternal grandparents, before everything got complicated; her in front of the Eiffel Tower with a thin man, apparently her brother.

Yes, it was Julian. Her older brother, the only one who knew the truth about her mother, the only one with whom she could speak honestly about the weight of keeping up appearances. Julian had told her, when she announced she was going to Colombia: "Running away doesn't solve anything. Ghosts travel in your

luggage." He had been right, of course. The ghosts had followed her to Bucaramanga. But now, for the first time, she felt she could face them.

Seeing Julian's face in the photo, she understood that her relationship with Hernando was also an attempt to reconcile with that past: loving a complex man, far from home, was her way of telling herself she could break the inherited tragic script without renouncing desire.

She got up and kissed Hernando. In less than three minutes, they were making love again, passionately, on her bed.

But this time there was something different. It was sex, overflowing passion, but above all a more spiritual form of communication, a way of saying with the body what words still couldn't express: "I see you. I accept you. Your wounds don't scare me because I'm wounded too."

Marianne felt she was giving herself to a man surrounded by stories without demanding he erase any: Hernando's appeal, precisely, was that he came with marks. And Hernando, plunging into her, had for the first time the certainty that he didn't need to promise a fidelity that he knew life, in its brutal complexity, always tested: what he offered Marianne wasn't the guarantee of never failing, but the commitment not to lie to her about who he was.

Hernando penetrated her slowly, observing her face, and thought of Plato, in The Symposium, in Aristophanes' speech about how human beings were originally complete but were divided by the gods, and since then seek their other half. It was a myth, of course, a metaphor. But at that moment, with Marianne, he felt something like that mythical completeness.

However, unlike the myth, he didn't see in her a lost half that magically completed him, but another whole, with her own baggage, with her own shadows; and that seemed more true: they wouldn't be two identical halves uniting to form a perfect whole, but two incomplete beings deciding to walk together knowing their cracks wouldn't disappear.

Marianne arched her back, her hands on his chest, and thought of something she had read in Simone de Beauvoir, about how sex could be either a form of domination or a form of mutual freedom.

With Riakola it had been domination—he trying to possess her, she trying to rebel. With Hernando it was freedom: both giving themselves without losing their individuality, both taking without demanding.

She recalled, like an echo, the idea that "one is not born a woman, but becomes one"; there, between the sheets, she felt one could say the same about love: one is not born faithful or unfaithful, one learns to inhabit desire without turning the other into an object. With Hernando, for the first time, she didn't feel like a thing or a trophy.

When they reached orgasm, they did so almost simultaneously, and for a moment the world reduced to that connection, to that point of confluence where two solitudes met without mutually annulling.

Afterward, they lay entwined, sweaty, satisfied in a way that went beyond the physical.

"I've never been so happy," Marianne said, and she meant it, though she knew happiness was ephemeral, that tomorrow there would be new problems, that life wasn't a fairy tale.

Her declaration, candid for a seducer who just deflowers a maiden with marriage promises, as Don Juan would have done, was in her an act of bravery: admitting happiness knowing it could unravel was her way of challenging the family tragedy that had marked her since childhood.

"That's what lovers say when they recover love," Hernando responded, smiling, and Marianne knew he felt it too, that feeling of having found something worth protecting.

In his interior, he completed the phrase: "And I, for the first time, feel that the love I recover is not the one I had with Nancy nor the one I played with Ariadna, but a new one, that admits my history without demanding I erase it."

"I mean it," Marianne said.

For him, that moment was almost a refutation of his own cynicism: after Nancy, after Ariadna, he didn't believe possible a love not contaminated by power games or emotional blackmail. However, there it was, with a woman who knew of the others' existence and still looked at him without demanding he purge his

past.

The next morning, seated at a cast aluminum dining table, with a pale face before the city of Bucaramanga spread out like a tapestry of lights beginning to turn off with dawn, and wearing the previous day's clothes wrinkled by sleep and sex, Hernando, with his hair still damp from the morning shower, poured coffee into two cups on the table.

He smiled at Marianne, who, from inside the apartment, served plates with scrambled eggs and toast. The domesticity of the scene moved him. It was something he had never had with Nancy—she had always maintained a certain distance, a certain performance of independence that didn't allow these simple moments. And with Ariadna everything had been secret, stolen, stained by guilt and danger.

He discovered, with an almost childish surprise, enjoying that minimal gesture of sharing breakfast, as if the true sentimental utopia wasn't absolute fidelity but the possibility of making the extraordinary everyday: waking up together without masks.

Hernando kissed her and possessed her on the table, the plates trembling, the coffee spilling a bit, and neither cared about the mess because something more important was happening, something to do with claiming the present, with saying with the body what the uncertain future threatened: "Now. This is now. And now is enough."

Marianne, as she let herself be carried away, thought with somber humor that perhaps she had always been attracted to "dangerous" men, but that only now one of them offered her, besides the risk, a project of truly shared life.

Their silhouettes shone under the dawn sun, projected against the window for the whole city to see, and Hernando didn't care. Let them see. Let them know that for once in his life he wasn't hiding anything, wasn't ashamed of his desire, wasn't pretending to be someone he wasn't.

Two days have passed since the night Ariadna recorded him and betrayed him. Two days in which Hernando has barely slept, has walked the city like a ghost, has tried to write and only managed to cross out, has called Marianne to take refuge in her voice, has

avoided the office like one avoids the crime scene. Two days in which the city has continued its indifferent course, while he tried to decide if it's worth fighting for a job he no longer wants, for a life he no longer recognizes.

With Marianne, he intuited, love wouldn't be based on impossible promises of eternal fidelity, but on the daily decision not to hide. His intimate certainty—though he didn't formulate it yet—was that that kind of love had more chances of surviving passing idylls and the ashes of old loves.

On the sixth floor of a building, hours later, Hernando's stern face was visible among palm leaves swayed by the wind coming from the Chicamocha Canyon.

"You know I can still help you," Ariadna said, and her voice had that unctuous quality of someone offering a favor expecting something in return, "if that's what you want."

"Tell him it was you who gave me the bottle," Hernando insisted, keeping his voice firm despite the nausea he felt at being in her presence again.

A voice called him from Ramiro's office. Hernando's heart raced. He knew what was coming.

In front of Ramiro's desk, his boss—a man who had built his architectural empire with the same meticulousness with which he now destroyed it—Hernando listened attentively to the recording of his conversation with Ariadna the night before, played through the manager's computer speaker:

"Anything else?"

Sound of kiss.

"You want to make love to me, right? That's what you want. That's why you came."

Hernando felt the blood rush to his face. Not out of shame for the sexual act—that was between adults—but for the trap, for having fallen like an idiot into something so obvious. Ariadna had recorded him. She had planned everything meticulously, from emptying the bottle to provoking him to go to her house, to seducing him while some hidden device captured every word.

A part of himself, the most ruthless, accused him: "You think you're Abelard, but sometimes you're barely a clumsy student of

your own readings."

He thought of Samson and Delilah, of how the Bible was full of warnings about powerful men destroyed by cunning women. Not because women were inherently treacherous—that misogynistic reading repulsed him—but because in a society that denied them direct power, they had had to become experts in indirect power, in manipulation, in using male desire as a weapon.

The biblical story ceased to be for him an example of "female evil" and became a case of desire engineering: when someone is denied all other forms of influence, the most logical thing is for them to turn eroticism into a battlefield.

Ariadna couldn't be labeled evil, just as neither Medea nor Phaedra were. She was a desperate woman using the only tools that twenty years of unhappy marriage had taught her to use.

He stood up and pressed the pause control with the mouse, stopping the recording. He observed Ramiro, who scrutinized with severity Ariadna's irate and excessively made-up face.

His ex-lover alternated her gaze between Ramiro, Hernando, the recorder, and the palm trees waving beyond the window, as if seeking an exit that didn't exist.

"I don't deny it," Ariadna said, and there was a desperate challenge in her voice. "I'm affectionate and several colleagues in this office have courted me. Men ask me out."

Ramiro's face flushed slightly. Hernando wondered if Ramiro himself had been one of those "colleagues," if his current severity wasn't partly jealousy disguised as professional rectitude.

"But there's no phrase that compromises me," Ariadna added. "I just limited myself to nodding at Hernando's questions."

It was technically true, Hernando thought. In the recording, she never explicitly admitted emptying the bottle. She was smart, smarter than he had given her credit for. But she was also desperate, and desperation makes people make mistakes.

"Is that true?" Ramiro asked.

"I don't contradict her," Hernando said, choosing his words carefully.

"The candidates for the vacant position are waiting for us," Ariadna said, trying to change the subject, to move the

conversation to safer ground.

"However..." Hernando interrupted her.

Ariadna looked at him enraged; Ramiro, with curiosity.

"It's strange that Ariadna didn't report what would seem to be," Hernando continued, and here was his move, "according to her interpretation, a scene of sexual harassment."

The air in the office changed instantly. Ariadna paled, understanding too late where Hernando was going with this.

"That's true..." Ramiro nodded, and addressing Ariadna, added: "Why didn't you tell me this morning?"

"I told you that Hernando had bothered me."

It was true, Hernando knew immediately. She had laid the groundwork to accuse him of harassment, but without formalizing it. Another calculated move. But there was a flaw in her logic.

Ramiro brought his lips to Ariadna's ear, without realizing that Hernando could read his lips perfectly.

"That excites me," Ramiro whispered. "And the sexual harassment thing?"

"It slipped my mind..."

"Just like the whiskey bottle you gave me and that you emptied without my consent?" Hernando intervened.

The silence that followed was absolute. Ariadna opened her mouth but no sound came out. She had been caught in her own trap.

"I won't allow..." Ariadna protested, but her voice lacked the previous conviction.

"I need us to talk alone, Ariadna," her boss snapped at her.

Ramiro entered his office. Ariadna shot a flash of hatred at Hernando—a pure, distilled hatred, the hatred of someone seeing her revenge turned to ashes—and advanced after her boss.

Now alone, Ramiro closed the door and leaned against his desk, arms crossed, the expression of a man more disappointed than furious.

"It's the fifth time this has happened," he told her.

Ariadna felt as if a bucket of ice water had been thrown over her. The fifth time? Did Ramiro know about the others?

"I'm not lying," Ariadna replied, but even to her own ears it

sounded weak.

"You'll forgive me, Ariadna, but this business can't be the stage for your adulteries."

The word "adulteries" hit her like a slap. Not "affairs," not "indiscretions," but "adulteries," with all the moral and legal weight the term carried.

"What did Hernando tell you?"

"It's true that you have all possible alibis, Ariadna, but there are too many coincidences. Your husband is a wealthy man. Your economic income doesn't depend on this job."

Ramiro pointed to a stack of plans on his desk.

"I've been reviewing Hernando's plans. They're certainly not the work of an alcoholic."

And there it was: the recognition that Hernando was good at what he did, that his plans were brilliant, that the accusation of alcoholism didn't hold up against the evidence of his work. It was the triumph of merit over slander, of talent over manipulation.

Ariadna's lips trembled out of control. For the first time in twenty years, since she had yielded to her parents' pressure to marry Emeterio, she felt she truly had no control over her life.

"You'll resign and sell me your shares," Ramiro said. "In exchange, I promise discretion before your husband."

It was a generous deal, considering. Ramiro could have fired her publicly, could have told Emeterio about all her idylls. But he was a businessman, and he knew discretion benefited both parties.

Ariadna nodded without words. There was nothing more to say.

Hernando watched impatiently as Ariadna spoke with Ramiro through the glass of the Manager's office. He saw their silhouettes distorted by the light entering from the window, two shadows locked in a negotiation that would determine his future.

He thought of all the thinkers he had read about power and justice. Machiavelli would have said Ariadna had made the mistake of not being cruel enough—she should have destroyed him completely or not tried at all. Nietzsche would have seen this as an example of the will to power, two conflicting forces where the stronger eventually prevails. Kant would have applied his

categorical imperative and concluded that Ariadna had failed because her maxim—using others as means to her ends—couldn't be universalized without destroying society itself.

And yet, above those interpretations, a sadness almost Christian imposed itself on him: the realization that, under all those theories, what he saw was simply a woman crushed by a system of loyalties and appearances that she had tried to circumvent in her clumsy way.

But Hernando didn't feel the triumph of the victorious avenger. He felt rather a deep sadness for what could have been and wasn't, for an intelligent and capable woman who had been reduced by her marriage and her society to using such clumsy weapons.

Suddenly, Ariadna left the office sobbing and headed to her desk; she took her purse and left, not without first looking at Hernando for an instant with teary eyes.

In that look, Hernando saw not hatred but defeat, and something more: a silent plea. "Don't judge me too harshly. You don't know what it's like to live twenty years being invisible."

And Hernando, despite everything, felt compassion. Because he understood that in other circumstances, with another marriage, with another life, Ariadna could have been like Marianne: complete, fulfilled, at peace with herself. But circumstances matter, and she had made the wrong decisions at the wrong moments, and now she was paying the price.

That thought, far from absolving her, forced him to look at himself too: how many of his own decisions, made in the heat of desire or pride, had dragged him to that point where he needed a weapon in the glove compartment in case Riakola appeared?

Minutes later, Hernando was driving his car while listening to news on the radio. Bucaramanga's traffic flowed around him, indifferent to his personal drama. Street vendors offered mangos at traffic lights, students ran toward Santo Tomás University, life continued with its implacable rhythm.

"In a bloody incident," a announcer said with that professionally grave voice Colombian journalists use for tragedies, "in the exclusive Altos de Cabecera neighborhood, two men were shot to death by a subject whom several witnesses describe as..."

Hernando changed the channel: current pop music, something by Shakira or Juanes, he didn't pay attention. His mind was elsewhere, processing what had just happened, trying to make sense of it.

He observed to his side a man from another car pointing a gun at him.

Time stopped.

Hernando saw the weapon with crystalline clarity: it was a revolver, possibly a .38, the kind of gun every hitman in Colombia carries. He saw the finger on the trigger, saw the man's eyes—cold, professional, without personal hatred. This man didn't know him, had nothing against him. It was simply a job.

He accelerated instinctively and heard a shot behind him. The sound was deafening even with the windows closed, a crack that reverberated in his eardrums and would make him hear a buzz for the next hours.

He advanced swiftly along a road covered by fog—the characteristic fog of this part of the Canyon, descending from the mountains like a ghostly river—until two Jeeps, one on each side, forced him to brake.

"This is the end," he thought with strange calm. "This is how it ends. Not in poetic glory like Lorca shot by fascists, but in an ambush on a Santander road, probably because of a woman I slept with twice."

The comparison with Lorca drew a bitter smile from him: he wasn't an immortal poet, wouldn't die in a myth of resistance; if he fell, it would be like so many anonymous Colombians, victim of a sum of private passions and criminal economies.

He tried to put it in reverse, but a hand gripping his steering wheel immobilized him; it was Juan, who observed him defiantly with his one good eye, the tattooed hand clutching the wheel.

"Don't you recognize your uncle's car anymore?" said a cavernous voice.

Juan withdrew and Doctor Schwerter appeared before him, enveloped by the fog like an apparition, like Mephistopheles emerging from the smoke in Goethe's Faust. Five bodyguards surrounded him, all armed, all with that posture of professional

soldiers.

"Uncle Armando..."

The appellative sounded pathetic even to his own ears. As if the family bond meant something in this context, as if it could save him from the fate his uncle had decided for him.

Juan opened the door, and Hernando had no choice but to obey.

He got out of his car with trembling legs. The road air was cold, laden with humidity, and for an absurd moment he thought: "At least I'll die in a beautiful place."

"It's been almost a year since you visited us," Schwerter said, and there was a reproach in his voice beyond simple family courtesy. "In other circumstances, this reunion would be a cause for joy."

Hernando then understood that his uncle was hurt. Not just enraged by Joel, but genuinely hurt by his abandonment. Schwerter, the feared drug trafficker, the guerrilla turned businessman, the man who had ordered dozens of deaths, still needed his family's affection. It was almost touching in its pathos.

"What happened?"

"They killed Pedro," Schwerter said with a voice that for the first time showed something like emotion. "They seriously wounded Joel... A few hours ago."

Hernando felt as if he had been punched in the stomach. Joel. His cousin Joel, with whom he had played as children, with whom he had shared teenage secrets, before their lives took such different paths.

"But," Hernando stammered, "how?"

"Riakola Salcedo was the material author," his uncle elaborated, "out of jealousy."

And there it was: the connection Hernando had feared but not wanted to admit. Riakola had attacked Joel not for business, not for territory, but because Hernando had stolen Marianne from him. A lateral revenge, a blow that hurts the enemy by wounding his loved ones.

"I should have foreseen it," Hernando muttered, and he meant it. He should have known that getting involved with a narco's ex-

girlfriend would have consequences. But love—or whatever he felt for Marianne—had made him imprudent.

And yet, thinking of her, he didn't regret choosing her: for the first time, the price of his decisions didn't seem an argument against love, but a painful proof that he loved something not based on the lie of purity, but on the truth of two overflowing stories.

"You're in skirt troubles," his uncle snapped at him, and there was contempt in his voice, the contempt of the man who has followed the rules—the business rules, brutal but clear—toward the nephew who has broken them for passion.

"Uncle!"

"And Joel is the one who might die for it."

The guilt settled in Hernando's chest like molten lead. Joel could die. His cousin, who had saved him from Riakola's attack in the restaurant, who had used his power to protect him, was now agonizing in some private hospital because of his decisions.

Hernando recoiled with a hint of remorse twisting his guts.

"It's possible you'll run into Riakola before we do."

Schwerter pulled a revolver from under his jacket—a Smith & Wesson .357 Magnum, Hernando recognized it because his father had had an identical one—and placed it in his trembling hands.

The weapon weighed much more than Hernando had imagined, and not just from the physical weight of steel and wood, but from the moral weight, the cross of all it represented. With this weapon he could kill a man. That would make him a murderer, would lower him to Riakola's level, would chain him forever to the world of violence he had tried to escape.

"If you see him," Schwerter said with a terrible calm, "kill him; or watch him kill you."

Hernando nodded nervously, but inside he rebelled against what his uncle asked of him. He thought of Gandhi, of Mandela, of all the men who had chosen non-violence even when violence seemed the only option. He thought of Christ saying "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's," drawing a line between the temporal world of violence and the spiritual world of morals.

The tradition of non-violence offered him a dignified way out, but also confronted him with his own impotence: what value did

that ethic have if those who practiced it couldn't prevent their loved ones from being killed?

But he also thought of Joel bleeding, of his cousin who could die, and felt that his philosophical pacifism was a luxury he perhaps couldn't afford.

"What have we gained?" Schwerter mused, and there was an existential fatigue in his voice that Hernando had never heard from him. "We acquired power, money, and some negative fame. And in the end, we survive as fugitives."

It was an extraordinary confession. His uncle, Dr. Schwerter, the man who appeared on the DEA's most wanted lists, who was investigated by the Prosecutor's Office but never charged for lack of evidence, who controlled entire territories in eastern Colombia, was admitting that it had all been in vain.

Hernando thought of Macbeth, of that devastating monologue: "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

In his uncle's figure he saw the aged Macbeth, exhausted by his own crimes, realizing too late that power obtained through crime doesn't bring peace but only more violence, that each victory is the prelude to a new battle, that the cycle never ends until you end.

His uncle was aged Macbeth, realizing too late that the power sustained by violence ends up devouring even those who wield it.

Schwerter covered his eyes with his fingers, an almost childish gesture of exhaustion, turned around, and entered his car without saying more.

The two Jeeps drove away into the night, leaving Hernando alone on the fog-enveloped road, with a weapon in his hands and an impossible decision ahead.

Hernando studied his revolver. He turned it in his hands, feeling its weight, its coldness. He opened the cylinder: six bullets, all there, waiting. He closed the cylinder with a metallic click that sounded obscenely loud in the road's silence.

And he fired at the forest facing him with its silence.

The recoil surprised him, almost making him lose balance. The sound was deafening. Some bird flew out from the trees, startled.

The echo of the shot bounced between the mountains, multiplying, as if the entire eastern Colombian mountain range was repeating his sin.

"Now I'm capable of killing," he thought. "I've crossed that line. I'm no longer the intellectual who only reads about violence. I'm a true Colombian, son of this land where men settle their differences with lead."

Even so, an internal voice corrected him: shooting at trees didn't make him a killer, but a terrified someone proving to himself that he could, if it came to it, pull the trigger. He didn't know if at the moment of truth he would have the same steady hand.

But even as he thought it, he knew he was self-deceiving. Shooting at a tree wasn't the same as shooting at a man. He could have the weapon, could have used it, but he didn't know if he would have the courage—or the madness—to aim at a human being and pull the trigger. He once quoted Gandhi, who said he found a hundred reasons to die for something, but none to kill.

He got back into his car and drove toward the city, the revolver on the passenger seat, looking at him like a snake that could bite him at any moment.

Seated on a dimly lit divan, Ariadna drank a glass of whiskey with a desolate air. It was the expensive whiskey Emeterio bought, the Johnnie Walker Blue Label that cost more than many Colombian families earned in a month. She drank it straight from the glass, without ice, without water, trying to drown something she knew couldn't be drowned with alcohol.

A car light illuminated the interior space, projecting long shadows on the walls decorated with abstract art that Emeterio had bought not because he liked it but because an advisor told him it would increase in value.

Ariadna got up, turned on the light, and opened the door.

Emeterio, her husband, a bald man with a thick black mustache that gave him the air of a banana republic dictator, emerged from the dimness with a smiling air. It was the smile of the man who has just closed a good deal, who has just won something.

Ariadna hugged him and sobbed on his lap, and he received her with surprise. They weren't accustomed to physical intimacy after

so many years of dead marriage. Emeterio patted her wet sex—still wet from her encounter with Hernando hours before—and hugged her confused, not understanding why she was crying but vaguely satisfied that she was crying in his arms.

Minutes later, Ariadna lay in her bed, naked, covered by Egyptian linen sheets of 800 threads that Emeterio insisted on buying though she couldn't notice the difference from 400.

"It was I who interviewed him," she said with a broken voice; "it was I who backed him against the other candidates; it was I who hired him; it was I who contacted him and taught him the secrets of the trade..."

In front of a large closet, in pants, Emeterio put on his undershirt and shirt leisurely, with that deliberate slowness he used when processing information.

"I never thought he would be so ungrateful," Ariadna concluded, and the tears were real though the story was half.

"Those who expect gratitude are fools," Emeterio said with that cynical philosophy he had developed in his years as a money launderer for drug trafficking.

Ariadna looked at him irate, offended that he was indirectly calling her a fool.

"Hernando acted knowing the risks," Emeterio pointed out, and there was something in his tone that made Ariadna pay more attention.

"There's something else you don't know."

Her spouse looked at her longingly, and Ariadna saw in his eyes that gleam of excitement that always appeared when he was about to learn of one of her infidelities. It was sick, she knew, but Emeterio got aroused by her betrayals. It was as if he needed to be betrayed to justify his own adventures, to maintain that emotional distance that protected him from the vulnerability of genuine love.

Ariadna blinked nervously, considering how much to tell him, knowing that every word she said would have unpredictable consequences.

Around eleven at night, a faint ray of moonlight reflected on Hernando's apartment door. The moon was almost full, a silvery disk projecting bluish shadows on the wooden floor.

He heard the noise of a coin falling—the old trick he had learned from movies to know if someone had entered. A coin that shouldn't be there, that someone had slipped under the door to announce their presence.

He reacted with calm movements that contradicted the panic in his chest. He glanced sideways: a curtain shuddered in the distance. There was someone in his apartment.

He drew his revolver quickly—the revolver his uncle had given him just hours before—and aimed at the curtain with surprisingly steady hands.

"Come out slowly."

A feminine hand emerged and drew the curtains with a theatrical movement.

Nancy's completely naked body advanced swaying with that feline grace that had fascinated him so much, and, leaning over a table, invited him to possess her with a gesture that was pure pornography, pure performance of desire.

Hernando slowly lowered the revolver from his hand and placed it in a drawer of the side table. His heart was still racing but no longer from fear but from a complicated mixture of desire, surprise, and exasperation.

"I thought it was..." he stammered. "Forgive me..."

"I wanted to surprise you," Nancy smiled with that smile she had practiced in mirrors, perfected over years of knowing exactly what effect it had on men. "I'm ready."

"I have to tell you, Nancy, that..."

"Is that the welcome you give me, after traveling from Medellín?"

And without waiting for an answer, Nancy knelt with a dancer's grace, opened his fly with expert fingers, and extracted his member from his pants. She began to suck it avidly, with a technique she had improved in their years apart, trying to show him everything he had lost.

"We can't go back," Hernando said while suffering an erection that betrayed his words, his body responding though his mind said no. "I'm committed and..."

But it was already too late for moral resistance. Nancy stood up

and kissed him passionately, and Hernando could taste his own complicity. He caressed her face while observing it.

"That's how you'll make many men happy," he told her. "But I've fallen in love with another woman."

"You can possess me whenever you want," Nancy replied, now without hope.

She turned to hide her face deformed by pain and showed him her guitar-shaped back.

She sobbed.

Hernando possessed her again, inflamed by her beauty.

Naked, covered by a sheet up to the chest, Hernando and Nancy lay on their backs. Both observed the ceiling.

"You know my mother adores you..." Nancy says. "My father too, in his way... Both say our children will be beautiful. My father wants to cancel our debts and, I didn't want to tell you, but I think this is the moment: My dad wants to buy us a new house in Lagos del Cacique!"

Nancy smiles at Hernando for a few instants. Her lover ignores her. Then she turns toward him on her side.

"Aren't they good news?"

"They would have been a month ago," Hernando replies, "Nancy…"

"Haven't you missed me?"

"No."

Nancy rolls her body until she's on her back with a disconcerted air.

"I admit I was wrong," Nancy adds.

"I knew it would happen."

"There's something I want to ask you."

"Yes?"

"Are you really happy with that woman? Happier than you were with me?"

Hernando looks her in the eyes.

"Yes."

Nancy stifles a moan and averts her gaze.

"I appreciate your sincerity..."

Her eyes water with tears.

"It's obvious that gypsy who made me choose between money, love, and fame tricked me," Nancy adds, holding back tears; "she was a demon. The only important thing in life is love. I think I should go; I'll take the early morning flight to Medellín."

Nancy sits up, gets up, and puts on her thong.

"I'll drive you."

The light turned on and Emeterio, with a discomposed face and shirt out of his pants, entered and lunged at a desk, from which he opened a drawer and extracted a revolver.

Ariadna, wearing a robe, entered after him.

"What are you planning to do?"

"This is not women's business..."

Elcira entered in her nightshirt and observed them from the door.

Emeterio left hurriedly.

"Emeterio!"

Elcira confronted Ariadna defiantly, who observed her with tensely wide eyes.

11. Bumangueses

The doorbell at Hernando's apartment rang again and again—a short, sharp sound that, in suspense movies, usually announces tragedy. But here, in this apartment hanging over Bucaramanga, it sounded even worse: a reminder that no one escapes their past, not even newly discovered love.

Nancy, wrapped in a long white silk robe—the same one Hernando had given her in their first year together, when they still believed the future was promising—moved toward the door with a mix of haste and calculation. The silk clung to her warm body, tracing the curve of her generous hips, the roundness of her thighs, the heavy fullness of her breasts, which swayed with every step. She was a Rubens woman: big curves, skin with that imperfect cellulite texture that didn't hide but highlighted her carnality, flesh that refused restraint. Her quick breathing made the fabric stretch over her slightly rounded belly. Her whole body, made for pleasure more than discipline, trembled with that involuntary shake of someone who knows she's about to win or lose something vital.

She opened the door only as far as the security chain allowed.

On the other side stood Marianne. She didn't look like an academic, or a philosopher trained for years in emotional discipline. She looked like a wounded woman clutching a gift—a box wrapped in silver paper and blue ribbon—as if it were a piece of herself keeping her from falling apart. Her body was the opposite of Nancy's: square build, straight shoulders, almost no difference between waist and hips, small firm breasts with lines more sinuous than voluptuous. No generous curves, none of Nancy's overflowing carnality. But her face—her face had classical, almost sculptural beauty: high cheekbones, intelligent gray eyes, thin but perfectly shaped lips. An elegance that didn't need her body to announce itself. Now that face carried a mix of bewilderment and broken dignity.

Nancy watched her with the cruel delight of someone who

suddenly discovers she has the power to wound exactly where it hurts. In that moment, her ample body became a weapon: visible proof that Hernando had chosen flesh over intellect, pleasure over conversation.

"Yes?" Nancy asked, voice carefully neutral, though emotion trembled on her full lips.

"Excuse me…" Marianne stammered. "I think I'm on the wrong floor."

With that sentence, all the certainties she'd built during her relationship with Hernando began to crack. Doubt—so philosophical in other contexts—stuck in her throat like a thorn. She turned to leave, but the blow came fast:

"Are you looking for Hernando?" Nancy pressed, savoring the moment like an actress who knows exactly how to stand in the perfect light.

Marianne froze mid-turn. That was the instant her chest split open.

"Yes," she finally said, owning it.

Nancy smiled—a small, poisonous curve of the mouth.

"How are you, Señora Marianne? It's Nancy…"

Marianne felt the name like a stone tossed into a black lake. She remembered the story: the student who failed Ethics three times, the conflicts, the silences, the vague rumors.

Nancy unhooked the chain and opened the door wider, deliberately revealing the swell of her breasts under the silk. She let their weight press against the almost transparent fabric, the neckline gaping just enough to show the deep valley between them. The gesture was minimal, but it carried the aggressive sensuality of a cobra rearing up—a reminder that she owned something Marianne, with her more austere, angular body, could never offer.

"Do we know each other?" Marianne asked, though she already knew. Her eyes couldn't help comparing the bodies at that threshold: her own, firm but straight; Nancy's, flooding the doorway with flesh.

"I was your student. Three times," Nancy said, smiling mischievously and arching her back just enough to make her breasts stand out more.

That "three times" wasn't academic; it was a threat dressed up as an anecdote. Marianne swallowed. She no longer saw Nancy; she saw the memory of that night with Hernando, the perfect kiss, the coffee at dawn… now crushed by the possibility that it had all been a carefully woven lie, that he had always preferred that type of body, those curves, that carnality she could never offer.

Sensing the emotional storm swirling around them, Nancy stepped forward, her hips swaying in that natural way women with wide hips have.

"Hernando's in the shower. Come in."

The word *shower* hit Marianne like a slap. She had to lean against the wall to keep from collapsing.

"I'd rather not," she said, lowering her gaze to hide the shaking.

"I don't bite," Nancy whispered. "I'm single. We could even make it a ménage à trois… if that's what you're into."

That was the final blow. Marianne didn't think—she *felt* she had to get out of there before she shattered in front of this woman who enjoyed her humiliation like a delayed academic revenge. She held out the box.

"This is for him."

Nancy laughed—a short, nervous, almost hysterical laugh, the laugh of someone who's won but knows victory won't bring happiness. Marianne couldn't stand there another second. She turned and walked down the hallway without looking back, her steps steady but her soul in pieces, painfully aware that her square, curveless body would never compete with the carnal abundance she'd just seen.

At the door, Nancy—like a low-rent femme fatale overflowing with resentment—shut it with a triumphant gesture, her breasts bouncing slightly with the movement. Her revenge was complete, though she had no idea what price she'd pay for it.

Inside the apartment, the shower turned off. Hernando walked naked to the bedroom, towel across his shoulders, oblivious to the emotional earthquake that had just rattled his life a few feet away.

"Who was it?" he asked, suspecting nothing.

"A messenger. I don't know her," Nancy lied with practiced ease, making her voice sound casual.

Hernando noticed the gift on the table. The handwriting on the card made his spirit freeze.

"Marianne…"

Nancy tried to kiss him, but he gently pushed her away. The courtesy hurt her more than an insult. Calm and firm, he took her by the arm, walked her to the door… and left with his suitcase. Nancy didn't turn around, but everything in her rigid posture said she wasn't walking away from something; she was falling.

Dawn's first rays slid over the Cabecera Torres del Pasado building with the same indifference sunlight uses on a battlefield after the slaughter. That almost golden light bathed balconies and windows, touching a silence that felt freshly scrubbed by the morning.

At the foot of the building, in a corner where the light hadn't reached yet, Riakola sat hunched against a metal railing like a wounded animal practicing the patience of resentment. The makeshift bandage on his arm oozed crusted, dark-brown blood; the fabric was stiff with sweat. The wound was clearly infected—greenish edges, a faint stink of iron and raw meat. No one in Cabecera would have recognized that smell as human; it was more like a forgotten trash heap.

"Time to settle accounts…" he muttered, voice thick and slurred from lack of sleep, lack of food, and too much cheap liquor poured over too much pain.

His gold tooth—flashy proof of his "success" at parties—now glinted dully, dulled by fever burning in his eyes. He had the look of a man trapped between two worlds: the living, and the dying who refuse to accept it.

A stray dog sniffed him curiously from the median's trees. Riakola shooed it away with a sharp jerk; pain shot through his arm and drew a low growl from his throat. He touched the wound. It was hot as a coal.

He straightened up a little to study the building. He'd seen Marianne leave, distraught. He'd seen Nancy leave with her suitcase. He'd seen Hernando follow, determined. The scene had been a gift: an emotional triangle smashing itself apart in front of

him, as if the universe were confirming that chaos, for once, was on his side.

He smiled at the railing, showing gold between dried blood.

"Hernando… today you pay. But first… I need insurance."

His fever-addled mind raced with cold calculations. Go straight after Hernando and the ELV would intercept him. But if he had a hostage, a human shield, someone Hernando valued… then *he* held the cards.

And he knew exactly who that would be.

A few yards away, on a side street, three ELV members watched from a battered burgundy Renault that looked like any old car but had been customized inside. The engine purred irregularly, like it was breathing with them, cautious.

One of them held binoculars. He wasn't just anyone: Jerónimo Espadas, ELV commander. Years in the mountains were etched into his face; his skin was weathered, his thin mustache framed a mouth that had given too many kill orders to tremble now. Behind his steady eyes sat a different fatigue: the moral exhaustion of someone who's seen too many betrayals.

Jerónimo followed every one of Riakola's movements with hunter's calm. The deserter's stumbling, feverish gait was a clear sign he was almost caught.

"There's the bastard," he muttered. "Eyes open."

His voice was low and dry, the tone of a man who doesn't waste spit.

Beside him sat Nohora Valentina Sánchez, the woman he'd once condemned to death with a bomb collar, believing she had stolen money from the movement. He hadn't known then that Nohora took the money to stop a massacre of innocents he'd ordered, thinking they were enemies instead of civilians. Riakola had been the one assigned to escort her to execution. On the way—moved by her courage and, yes, her body—he'd chosen to save her. He'd paid *El Relojero* to deactivate the collar, then detonated it far away so he could present the remains as proof of her death to his immediate superior, Martín. Nohora had fled to Ecuador with her children. For months she'd mailed grateful letters to Riakola, knowing full well she'd slept with him, but

believing she'd offered her body in exchange for her life.

Years later, Jerónimo found out the truth. Nohora had been innocent; she'd tried to prevent an atrocity. The planned massacre would have been unforgivable. Martín was executed for hiding information, and Jerónimo tracked down Nohora to beg forgiveness and offer her work in the movement. She accepted and became one of his most valuable allies. Respect grew into trust; trust hardened into love. It was Jerónimo who told her the full story: that Riakola hadn't saved her out of pure heroism, but out of lust. That revelation turned Nohora's gratitude into fury.

Now, back in Bucaramanga, her face had the dull sheen of someone who no longer fears death; she's already felt its breath on her neck. She clenched her jaw, breathing fast, adrenaline running high. She could still feel, in the tactile memory of her skin, the weight of that collar: the crudely assembled metal ring, the hand-packed C-4, the screws biting her neck, the timer taped on crooked. The chemical stink of explosives sometimes came back to her like an olfactory flashback.

For her, the collar wasn't gear; it was a leash. The phantom touch of that metal still grazed her throat like an invisible predator.

"Ready?" Jerónimo asked, eyes never leaving the binoculars.

"More than ready," Nohora said, her voice now edged with steel instead of fear.

It wasn't the voice of the terrified woman from 2003. It was the voice of someone who'd come out of hell scorched but standing.

Jerónimo dropped the binoculars for half a second.

"Are you sure you want to be here?" he asked without irony.

She met his gaze.

"I need to see him fall," she said. "Not to kill him. To close the chapter. So my kids can finally sleep without fear."

There was something almost spiritual in her stance—a hunger for justice, not revenge. Justice doesn't fix anything, but at least it puts things in order.

Jerónimo nodded.

"Then you'll see justice today."

The other two ELV men, silent as carved stone, exchanged a quick glance. They knew that when Jerónimo said *justice*, he didn't

mean courts. He meant balance—the underground law that rules guerrilla morality.

Riakola looked up. Even without seeing them, he sensed something. Animal instinct told him the air had shifted, that morning now smelled like pursuit. He hauled himself up, gripping the railing; fresh blood trickled from the bandage. He looked both ways, breathing fast and shallow.

"First Marianne," he whispered. "Then Hernando. After that… whatever comes, comes."

Inside the Renault, Jerónimo made his decision.

"He's moving. We follow. Not a meter early. Not a meter late."

Nohora nodded. The men checked their weapons—not to kill, but to control the field if needed.

Riakola staggered toward where he'd seen Marianne's car parked earlier. His mind was ice-cold despite the fever: she was the key, his passport to Hernando, his human shield.

Marianne's apartment was wrapped in silence, thick and sterile like an operating room. She'd left the door unlocked—a trivial domestic detail that, on this morning, became a crack in the walls of her world.

She went straight to the kitchen and didn't turn on the lights, letting the gray shine on the tiles speak for her. She poured herself some already-brewed coffee; the deep, bitter aroma filled the air. That smell, which usually calmed her, now felt ominous, as if the steam curling up from the cup were a ghost rising. She took it out to the bedroom terrace, where the city of Bucaramanga spread under a silvery veil, still damp with the night.

The wind carried engine sounds, distant voices, the murmur of life continuing without her. Marianne opened her diary with a sigh. The leather was worn at the corners like an old confessional book tired of secrets.

She wrote:

April 18, 2007.

Schopenhauer says Platonic dialogues are not only idealistic but idealized, that real Socratic conversations are impossible, because when someone loses an argument, they never accept even the strongest logic— they fall back on

insults…

The pen flowed smoothly. Her handwriting was clean, almost mathematical, as if even her pain had been trained not to spill over.

Insults can be direct, she continued, *or delivered behind the victim's back.*

She remembered students humiliated by her own ego, professors shouting at her when they were corrected by a younger, sharper, less pliable woman. Outside, a door slammed; a dog barked. The wind lifted a strand of her hair. She focused again.

Sleepless, eaten up by envy… their joy is watching those better than them fall.

As she wrote, she noticed something off: a shadow sliding across the terrace. It wasn't cast by the sun or by anything inside. It was human. Then, in a blink, it was gone.

She looked up with a shiver.

"Is someone there?" she called, more reflex than conviction.

Silence answered—heavy, smelling of dried blood and cold sweat. She barely turned to reach for the cup, and when she looked back at the curtain, the figure was already inside.

Riakola.

His gold tooth flashed like a blade. His bandaged arm was swollen and festering; the cloth was rigid with layers of dried blood. His eyes were two feverish pits, lit by something that wasn't reason. His shirt clung to his sweat-soaked torso, small spasms twitching in his chest like he was holding back full-body convulsions.

Marianne let out a strangled gasp. The cup crashed to the floor with a crack like a bone breaking. Riakola smiled—a crooked, swollen mask of despair.

"Don't scream," he whispered, his breath hot with fever. "You scream, you die. You cooperate, maybe we both walk out of this."

He pulled a rusty but functional pistol from his waistband and aimed it right at her face.

"What… what do you want?" she managed, voice cracking.

"I need a ride to the airport," Riakola said, stepping closer. "And I need you to behave. You're gonna be my chauffeur… and my life insurance."

"I don't understand…"

"You don't *need* to understand!" he snapped, then forced his voice down, aware yelling might draw attention. "You just do what I say. Hernando's heading to the airport right now. You and I are going to meet him there. And you're going to watch that son of a bitch pay for taking everything from me."

Her legs turned to water.

"Riakola, please… this doesn't make sense. You're sick, you need a hospital…"

"WHAT I NEED IS JUSTICE!" he roared, then panted, forcing control back. "You took your eyes off me. You tossed me aside. You picked *him*. Now you'll see what happens when someone takes what's mine."

"I was never yours," Marianne said, some spark of courage flaring under the terror.

He hit her with the back of his hand. He was too weak for a hard blow, but it was enough to slam her against the wall and split her lip.

"Walk," Riakola ordered. "We're going to your car. You try anything—anything—and I blow your brains out and use your corpse as a shield anyway. Got it?"

Marianne nodded, tears streaming, blood salty in her mouth.

He shoved her toward the door, gripping her arm with the same hand that held the gun. His feverish body trembled against her back. They took the stairs—he didn't want to risk the elevator—and reached the underground garage.

"Keys," he demanded.

She handed them over with shaking fingers. He pushed her into the driver's seat.

"You drive. I'll be back here, with this pointed at the base of your skull. One strange move, one signal to anyone, anything I don't like—and I fire. Clear?"

"Yes," Marianne whispered.

She started the car. Her hands shook so badly she could barely keep a grip on the wheel. She pulled out of the garage; the morning sun stabbed her eyes, and she headed toward the highway to the airport.

Behind them, at a safe distance, the burgundy Renault rolled

out as well.

"He took someone," Nohora said, narrowing her eyes. "There are two in that car."

Jerónimo's jaw clenched.

"He's got a hostage. The bastard took a hostage."

"What now?"

"We follow. Carefully. If he feels cornered, he'll kill whoever he's got."

The Renault kept its distance, like a shark shadowing a leaking boat.

The digital clock on Emeterio's dashboard read 7:24 a.m. when he started the engine for the third time without moving, just listening to the low rumble like it was the car's breathing—and his. He'd been there all night, parked half a block from Hernando's apartment, watching, the .44 Magnum beside him gleaming like temptation.

The gun was a totem: heavy, cold, precise, the opposite of his life—lukewarm, social, civilized. Having it within reach made him feel like someone else, someone capable of avenging his honor, although some lucid part of him knew he didn't have the stomach to kill.

But this wasn't a normal day. He'd spent twenty hours feeding a hatred he had manufactured himself. His hands clenched the steering wheel until his knuckles went white.

"This can't go on," he muttered. "This man is going to ruin my life."

It was absurd. He knew it somewhere inside. But jealousy doesn't ask for logic; it demands blood.

In the distance, he finally saw movement: Hernando leaving with Nancy, suitcase in hand. An everyday scene, but in his sick mind, it took on tragic proportions. Emeterio felt his heart sink into his gut.

"There he goes…" he whispered.

The engine hummed when he pressed the gas. A little more and he'd be following the yellow car carrying Hernando and Nancy. One more second, and he'd have crossed an irreversible line.

That's when his phone rang: a brief buzz, then another, then another, more insistent, harsh, as if the device had lost patience too.

He ignored it, then glanced at it, then snatched it up. On the screen, the last name he wanted to see: *Elcira*.

The woman his wife had pulled from the street years ago, the ex-prostitute Ariadna had given a job and dignity when no one else would. Elcira had become family, guardian of all their secrets—including the day Emeterio had almost killed Rafael, Ariadna's ex-lover, blinded by jealousy. It was Elcira who had stopped him then, speaking with the authority of someone who'd seen too much violence to be scared of it.

He hesitated, then answered.

"Yes?" he said tightly.

Her voice burst through, cracked as if she'd been crying for hours.

"Don Emeterio… please… come home."

The words hit like ice water.

"What happened?" he asked, eyes still locked on the yellow car pulling out.

"It's not what you think…" she said, shaking. "Doña Ariadna… she's been… not well. Very unwell, sir. For weeks now."

The world slowed around him.

"What do you mean, not well?"

"She hears voices," Elcira whispered. "Says people are watching her from other buildings… men spying on her… she's sure they're following her. And this morning she screamed that I'm working for someone, that I'm part of a conspiracy to destroy her… She said terrible things to me, Don Emeterio. Things I don't even want to repeat."

Her voice broke.

"You know it's not true. I owe everything to this family. Doña Ariadna pulled me off the streets. I would never hurt her. I would never hurt any of you."

The revolver beside him suddenly felt grotesque. For the first time, it inspired not courage, but shame.

"Put her on," he said, throat tight.

He heard shuffling, then Ariadna's breathing came through: shallow, confused, almost childish.

"Yes…?" she stammered.

That voice wasn't an adulteress's; it was a broken woman's.

"Ariadna… what's going on, my love?"

Silence, long and painful.

"I don't know…" she murmured. "I don't remember… everything is mixed up… I feel like I'm not myself… like they're watching me… like there are cameras in the walls… like someone comes into the house when I'm asleep…"

Another pause, longer.

"Hernando…? Was he here last night? He'd been drinking… I don't know… I don't remember… I'm scared, Meme… so scared…"

There's no word more lethal to a jealous man—and none more healing—than *scared*. Emeterio felt sweat bead in his palms. He loosened his chokehold on the steering wheel. The car air thickened.

"Listen to me," he said slowly. "Don't move. I'm coming home. I'm coming right now."

By the time he hung up, the yellow car was already disappearing toward the highway to the airport. For a moment he felt the urge to follow—to finish what he'd started, to close the revenge loop.

Then Ariadna's broken voice echoed in his memory. His daughters' questions from the night before. Elcira's plea. The ex-prostitute saving the family that had once saved her.

He glanced at the .44 Magnum. The instrument of "justice" he'd chosen now looked pathetic, a violent cartoon of a man he'd never been.

"My God…" he whispered. "What was I about to do?"

His eyes burned. Tears stung the lids he'd kept dry for years.

But hatred, once fed, doesn't die fast. It mutates, hunting for new justifications. As he started the car, intending to turn back home, the old voice returned, whispering poison:

What if Elcira's lying? What if Ariadna's faking to protect him? What if they're all playing you?

Once planted, doubt is almost impossible to pull out.

He drove a few yards, turned the corner, went two blocks… and stopped again. The engine idled. His hands locked around the wheel. In his mind, two roads opened with brutal clarity: left, toward his home, his sick wife, his daughters, sanity; right, toward the highway, Hernando, the airport, and vengeance—maybe pointless, maybe deadly.

He closed his eyes. Took a deep breath.

Then turned the wheel to the right.

"I'm just going to look," he lied to himself. "Just to check. Then I'll come back."

The rearview mirror flashed back his bloodshot eyes. He barely recognized the man staring back.

Hernando was already on the road to Palonegro, driving with Nancy at his side. Both stared straight ahead, tense, drowned in thoughts of everything that had just happened. The road climbed in curves, the abyss dropping away on one side, rusted guardrails lining the other. Trucks loaded with fruit and long-distance buses crawled along as if dragging the debris of other lives.

"I'm sorry about this morning," Nancy said finally, voice hoarse from swallowed tears.

"You don't have to apologize," Hernando answered, eyes on the asphalt.

"Yes," she insisted. "I wanted to humiliate her. I wanted her to feel what I felt when you left me."

Hernando sighed, tightening his grip.

"Nancy, I never meant to hurt you. Things weren't working. You know that."

"I know," she admitted, voice breaking. "That doesn't make it hurt less."

Traffic thickened near the airport exit: yellow taxis cutting lanes without warning, motorcycles threading recklessly between cars, a patrol car parked on the median, a truck stalled with its hood up while two men argued beside it. The whole place hummed with border energy: people arriving, people leaving, lives stuck in suitcase limbo.

Farther back, Marianne kept her hands glued to the steering wheel, feeling the ice-cold muzzle of Riakola's pistol pressing into the base of her skull.

"Faster," he ordered, voice thick with fever. "We can't lose him."

"I'm at the speed limit," Marianne said, fighting to keep her voice steady. "If I go faster, the cops will stop us."

The barrel dug deeper into her neck.

"Then be smart. Catch him without getting us pulled over."

She accelerated slightly, changed lanes to pass a bus. Her mind spun, searching for an angle, a way to escape or signal for help. But the steel at her nape reminded her that one wrong move could be her last.

On their tail, the burgundy Renault held its distance.

"He's chasing that yellow car," Nohora said. "Look, every time it pulls away, he speeds up."

"Can you see who's driving?" Jerónimo asked.

She squinted.

"It's a woman. I can't see clearly but… Jerónimo, I think it's Marianne. The professor."

Jerónimo's fingers clenched on the steering wheel.

"That bastard took her hostage. He's using her as a shield."

"What do we do?"

"We wait. If we act here, on the highway, he might kill her. We wait till they reach the airport. More space. More options."

Even farther back in the rolling caravan, Emeterio drove with a haunted look. His hands sweated on the wheel; the .44 Magnum bounced in the passenger seat at every bump. The decision had been made—or had made him: he was going to the airport. He'd confront Hernando, demand answers, and if they weren't the answers he wanted…

He avoided finishing the thought. The gun completed it for him.

Near the end of the procession, in a black Jeep, Dr. Schwerter drove with his usual clinical precision. Joel sat beside him, staring out the window, one hand resting over the bandaged wound on his chest.

"You sure Riakola's headed to the airport?" Joel asked.

"Absolutely," Schwerter said. "He called last night, half delirious. Said he was going to kill Hernando before leaving the country. I told him it was insane, but you know how he is when he gets obsessed."

Joel spat out the window.

"That idiot is gonna get us all killed."

"Not if we get there first," Schwerter replied. "Riakola is a problem that needs… resolution. Before he drags us under with him."

Joel gave a slow nod. He knew exactly what that meant.

Five vehicles. Five groups. All being pushed, as if by invisible hands, toward the same point.

The airport parking lot was a hive: families hauling suitcases, taxi drivers haggling, tour buses fumbling into spaces, vendors shouting about water and empanadas. The midday heat rose off the asphalt like breath from a sleeping animal.

Hernando parked in a central spot, turned off the engine, and sat there a moment, hands still gripping the wheel. Nancy watched his profile, trying to memorize his face like someone memorizing a landscape before exile.

"Well," she said at last. "I guess this is it."

He turned toward her, eyes carrying equal parts sadness and relief.

"Nancy, you deserve to be happy. Really happy. Someday you'll meet someone who can give you what I couldn't."

She gave a bitter, tear-shiny smile.

"You know what's worst? I know that. And it still doesn't hurt less."

They got out. Hernando lifted her pink suitcase from the trunk and set it on the pavement. High above, vultures circled lazily in a pristine blue sky.

Descendants of the ones that gorged themselves on my ancestors, he thought, remembering the slaughter that ended the Thousand Days' War, the 5,600 dead that bled out Colombia's best soldiers and, ultimately, its strength to fight for the Panama Canal. A

country used to watching others feed on its corpses and its chances.

Nancy grabbed the suitcase handle and faced him, eyes shiny.

"You don't have to come in with me," she said.

He hesitated. A part of him wanted to stretch this goodbye, to pretend one more minute could fix years of mistakes.

"It doesn't have to end like this," he said.

"If things don't work out with Marianne," Nancy sobbed, her chin trembling, "I'll be waiting for you…"

He shook his head gently.

"Nancy, you're an extraordinary woman. You deserve someone who loves you fully—not someone already in love with someone else."

"Do you love her?" she asked.

He paused, feeling the sun on his neck, the loudspeakers announcing flights overhead like loud moral verdicts.

"I think so," he said at last. "Or I could. If she lets me."

Nancy smiled through her tears, strangely grateful for his honesty.

"Then I hope you're very happy with her. Truly."

They hugged one last time. It wasn't the embrace of lovers, but of two shipwrecked people accepting they'll survive on different islands. Then Nancy turned and walked toward the terminal without looking back, dragging the pink suitcase that squeaked harshly across the concrete.

Hernando watched her go, feeling relief and melancholy twist together in his chest. He shut the trunk and was about to get back in the car.

That's when Marianne's car rolled into the lot, moving at a controlled speed, and stopped two rows ahead. Hernando didn't notice at first—he was lost in thought. The next second, what he saw snapped him to attention.

The driver's door opened. Marianne stepped out in stiff, unnatural motions. Even at a distance, he saw something was wrong: pale face, wide eyes, a way of moving that screamed threat.

Then he saw why.

Riakola climbed out from the back, gripping her arm, the pistol

buried against her ribs—hidden from casual onlookers, obvious to anyone paying attention. He looked worse than before: gaunt face, arm bandage soaked in fresh blood, eyes lit by the wild shine of a man with nothing left to lose.

Hernando's heart seized.

"No…" he whispered. "No, no, no…"

Riakola had spotted the yellow car. He dragged Marianne toward it, using her as a shield, moving slow but intent.

Instinctively, Hernando raised his hands.

"Riakola, let her go. Whatever you think I did to you, she has nothing to do with it."

"Shut up!" Riakola screamed, his voice echoing across the lot. "She has EVERYTHING to do with it! You stole her! She was my last chance at being decent, and you stole her from me!"

Marianne's voice shook:

"I'm sorry, Hernando… he forced me… I couldn't…"

"Shhh," Riakola hissed, clutching the gun tighter. "You're gonna stay quiet and watch. You'll see what happens to men who take what's mine."

Families started hustling their kids away. A security guard shouted into his radio. Chaos spread like a spill.

From the far end of the lot, the burgundy Renault eased in. Jerónimo read the scene in a heartbeat.

"He's got the professor as a hostage," he said. "We can't shoot. Not yet."

Nohora's hands balled into fists.

"What do we do?"

"We move in. Slow. Very slow."

He ordered his men out, spreading them around from different angles, weapons hidden but ready.

Almost at the same time, Emeterio's car pulled in. His paranoia-fogged brain took in the scene and misread everything. Hernando standing with his hands up. A woman he didn't recognize. An armed man. It all fused into one insane conclusion: this was some setup, some staged performance meant to fool him.

He stepped out with the .44 Magnum in hand.

"HERNANDO!" he shouted, marching forward. "That's it!

No more lies!"

Riakola twisted, startled by the new threat.

"Who the hell are you?" he yelled.

"I'm the husband of the woman this bastard is destroying!" Emeterio answered, the gun shaking in his grip.

Hernando, now between two armed men, felt like reality had split into a nightmare.

"Emeterio, what are you doing here? Put the gun down!"

"No! You don't give me orders! You, who sleeps with my wife and wrecks my family!"

"I never slept with your wife! She's sick, Emeterio! She needs help!"

Marianne, caught in the crossfire, tried to speak:

"Please… please, someone… it doesn't have to end like this…"

Her voice was swallowed by the rising noise.

That's when the black Jeep pulled in. Schwerter took one sweeping look: Riakola with a hostage, another armed civilian yelling, Hernando in the middle, and—he noticed with concern—Jerónimo's men quietly locking down the perimeter.

"This is headed for a massacre," he muttered.

"What do we do?" Joel asked.

Schwerter popped open the glove compartment and pulled out a Glock 19.

"We do what we came for," he said. "We finish this."

They stepped out of the Jeep.

Now three armed groups were closing in on the center of the lot, where Hernando stood frozen, hands raised, Marianne whimpering under Riakola's grip.

Riakola, realizing he was surrounded, clamped down even harder.

"Back! Everybody back or I blow her head off!"

Jerónimo stepped forward, just enough to be clearly seen.

Riakola spotted him and went pale.

"No…" he whispered. "No way…"

"Drop the gun, Riakola," Jerónimo said, voice firm. "It's over. You've got nowhere to go."

Nohora stepped into view. The sight of her hit Riakola like

another bullet. He began shaking uncontrollably.

"You… you were dead… I saved you…"

"You 'saved' me for the wrong reason," Nohora said, voice razor-sharp. "And now you're going to pay for everything else."

Schwerter recognized Jerónimo from afar and moved forward with his hands low, gun visible but not raised.

"Centeno," he greeted with a nod. "Been a long time."

"Schwerter," Jerónimo replied. "Time hasn't been kind to any of us."

"Looks like we share a problem," Schwerter said, tipping his chin toward Riakola. "A loose end that needs tying."

Jerónimo nodded.

"And a civilian in the middle. We can't afford mistakes."

Emeterio, totally lost now in this sudden tangle of guerrillas, narcos, and old scores, kept his gun waving dangerously.

"What *is* this?" he shouted. "Who the hell are all of you?"

"Sir," Jerónimo said, tone firm but not hostile, "put the gun down. This doesn't concern you."

"Yes, it does! That man stole my wife!"

Hernando spoke as calmly as he could.

"Emeterio, look at me. I haven't done anything to Ariadna. She's sick. Call Elcira. Call a doctor. But put that gun down before someone dies."

The words poked a small hole in the fog around Emeterio's mind. His hand started trembling harder.

Feeling control slip, Riakola made a desperate move. He yanked Marianne fully in front of him, a total human shield, and aimed straight at Hernando's head.

"If I can't have her," he screamed, "no one's going to have *you*!"

His finger tightened on the trigger.

Marianne screamed.

Hernando closed his eyes.

And Dr. Schwerter fired.

The shot was clean, cold, and calculated. The bullet smashed into Riakola's left leg just below the knee. Not a kill shot—an incapacitation shot. Enough to save the hostage without dropping a corpse at an international airport.

Riakola howled, lost his grip on Marianne, and collapsed. His gun skidded across the hot asphalt, spinning away with a long metallic scrape that seemed to echo forever.

Marianne bolted toward Hernando. He caught her, both of them shaking—but alive.

The gunshot shocked Emeterio into dropping his .44. It hit the pavement and—miraculously—didn't go off. He grabbed his head with both hands, legs buckling, and fell to his knees, finally seeing the edge of the abyss he'd been about to cross.

Jerónimo walked up to Riakola, who writhed on the ground clutching his bleeding leg. The commander crouched beside him.

"It's over," he said simply.

Riakola stared at him with glassy eyes, pain and fever swirling.

"Kill me…" he whispered. "Please… just kill me…"

"No," Jerónimo said, standing. "You don't deserve that mercy."

He turned to Schwerter, who had lowered his weapon but kept it in hand.

"Good shot," Jerónimo said.

"Efficient," the doctor replied with a shrug. "I'd prefer not to have to use it at all."

The two men locked eyes briefly, veterans recognizing that some wars never end; they just change scenery.

"What about him?" Schwerter asked, nodding at the groaning Riakola.

"My problem," Jerónimo said. "Movement business. But first, he goes to a hospital. Then… justice runs its course."

Schwerter nodded.

"And the witnesses?"

Jerónimo looked around: Hernando holding Marianne; Emeterio collapsed; security guards creeping closer; families peeking from behind cars.

"This was an incident," he called out, loud enough for the lot to hear. "A disturbed man took a woman hostage. A concerned citizen"—he pointed to Schwerter—"shot him in the leg to save her. Police will be here in minutes. That's what they'll find. Understood?"

Uneasy nods followed. No one wanted deeper involvement in something clearly dangerous.

He walked over to Emeterio, still on his knees, crying.

"And you," Jerónimo said, not unkindly, "pick up that gun, go home, and hold your wife. She needs you. Your daughters need you. This man"—he gestured to Hernando—"isn't your enemy. Understand that before it's too late."

Emeterio looked up, wrecked.

"I… I don't know what came over me…" he stuttered. "I'm not like this… I never…"

"We're all capable of awful things when fear and jealousy drive," Jerónimo said. "The difference is stopping before you cross the line. You stopped. Or we stopped you. Either way, be grateful."

Two of his men lifted Riakola, ignoring his screams, and dragged him toward the Renault.

Nohora stepped close enough for him to see her clearly, looking down with a mix of satisfaction and grief.

"For years I thanked you for saving me," she said. "From Ecuador I wrote letters, praying you were safe, thinking you were a hero. All that time you were just a predator who had a moment of selfish weakness."

He tried to speak; only a groan came out.

"I don't expect you to understand why this is necessary," she went on. "But I hope in prison, if you live long enough, you'll have time to think about all the lives you ruined. Including your own."

She turned and walked back to Jerónimo, who slipped an arm around her shoulders.

Schwerter approached Jerónimo one last time.

"We'll see each other again," he said.

"Probably," Jerónimo replied. "This country's too small for old soldiers."

"And too violent to let us retire," Schwerter added with a bitter smile.

They shook hands—brief, heavy with meaning.

Jerónimo's men loaded Riakola into the Renault, cuffed and bleeding. The car slipped out of the lot and into traffic before the sirens got close.

Schwerter and Joel headed back to their Jeep. The doctor paused, glanced at Hernando still holding Marianne, and gave the slightest nod—somewhere between *you're welcome* and *take better care of her*—before climbing in and driving off.

Emeterio picked up the .44 with shaking hands, shoved it clumsily into his waistband, and staggered to his car like a sleepwalker. He started the engine and, this time, steered toward home—toward his sick wife, his daughters, the life he'd almost destroyed chasing ghosts.

The parking lot slowly exhaled. Families resumed dragging suitcases. Taxi drivers went back to arguing. Security guards, after a few incoherent radio reports about "a minor incident," shrugged and returned to their posts.

Hernando and Marianne stayed wrapped around each other as if letting go would undo the miracle.

"You're okay," he whispered again and again. "You're okay. You're alive."

She shook against his chest, tears soaking his shirt.

"I thought I was going to die," she sobbed. "I thought I'd watch you die. I thought…"

"Shh," he murmured, stroking her hair. "It's over. It's over."

An ambulance finally arrived. Paramedics checked Marianne over. Split lip, bruised arms, full-blown shock—but nothing life-threatening.

"You really should come to the hospital," one said. "Full evaluation."

"I just want to go home," she answered.

"Ma'am, you've been through severe trauma…"

"I just want to go home," she repeated, firmer.

"I'll take her," Hernando said. "If she gets worse, I swear I'll bring her in."

The paramedic hesitated, then handed Marianne a card listing symptoms of acute stress and when to seek help.

Hernando helped her into his car, fastened her seatbelt when she couldn't manage it, and slid behind the wheel.

"To your place or mine?" he asked softly.

"Yours," she whispered. "I don't want to be in my apartment.

Not after he… after he was in there…"

He nodded.

They pulled away from the airport—where Nancy had left for a new life, where Riakola had fallen, where Emeterio had met his demons, where old wars had brushed against new love—and headed back down the winding road to the city.

Hernando glanced at his phone in the cup holder, then at Marianne.

"When we get home," he said gently, "I'm calling the police. We're reporting everything. Kidnapping, threats, assault. All of it."

She nodded weakly.

"And what do we tell them about the airport?" she asked.

"The truth," he said. "A disturbed man kidnapped you, brought you here at gunpoint, tried to shoot me, and a bystander shot him in the leg. Security saw it. The paramedics saw the aftermath. That's enough."

"And Jerónimo? And Schwerter? All of them?"

"That," Hernando answered carefully, "is for the police to dig into if they want. We don't have to get dragged into wars that aren't ours. We've had enough."

"I just want this to be over," she said.

"It *is* over," he told her, though they both knew the wounds would take longer to heal than the bruises.

By the time they reached Hernando's building, the sun was dropping, painting the mountains around Bucaramanga orange and purple. He helped her up the stairs and into the apartment.

He settled her on the couch. She sagged into it, body finally letting go.

"I'll make tea," Hernando said. "Then I'll call the police. Okay?"

She nodded.

He boiled water, called emergency services, calmly explained what happened, gave his address, and confirmed the victim was safe and the aggressor had been taken to the hospital after being shot by a civilian. They said a detective team would come in a few hours for full statements.

He made chamomile tea—something he'd once read helped

with shock—and carried it to her.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"You don't owe me thanks."

"Yes, I do," she said, meeting his eyes. "If he hadn't wanted to kill you… if I hadn't… if you hadn't been there…"

Her voice broke. Tears spilled again.

He sat beside her, slipped an arm around her shoulders, and let her cry into his chest. He didn't offer clichés or pretend everything would be fine overnight. He just held her.

Eventually her sobs slowed. She pulled back, wiping her face.

"I must look awful," she joked weakly.

"You look like someone who just survived something awful," Hernando said. "That's not ugly. That's brave."

She looked at him with gratitude and something deeper that didn't yet have a name.

"What happens now?" she asked. "With us, I mean."

He took her hand.

"Whatever you want," he said. "If you need space, if you need time, if you want to slow everything down… I'll understand. After today…"

"I don't want space," she cut in. "I don't want time. I don't want to slow down."

She held his gaze.

"I almost died today, Hernando. And all I could think, while he dragged me toward you with that gun, was how I'd die without saying things I needed to say."

"What things?" he asked softly.

"That I love you," she said, without hesitation. "That I don't care about Nancy, or your past, or the curves she has that I don't. When I saw her this morning, I thought I could never compete with that. But now I know it's not a competition. It's about being myself. And if that's not enough for you, then…"

Hernando stopped her with a kiss. Not frantic; deep and sure.

When they finally broke apart, he rested his forehead on hers.

"You're more than enough," he whispered. "You're everything I want. Nancy is my past. You, Marianne… you're my future. If you'll let me."

"I will," she said, smiling through tears. "I absolutely will."

They kissed again, longer this time, sealing what they'd been building since that first night of philosophy and coffee.

The rest of the afternoon unfolded in an odd quiet. Two officers arrived, took Marianne's statement, photographed her injuries, and wrote down every detail. Hernando added his version of the airport scene. The cops mentioned that a man with a gunshot wound to the leg had just been admitted to the University Hospital and was already under arrest.

"Will he be charged?" Marianne asked.

"With everything we've got," one officer said. "Kidnapping, attempted murder, weapons charges, threats. He won't see daylight for a long time."

After they left, night dropped over Bucaramanga, turning the city into a sea of lights.

"Hungry?" Hernando asked.

"A little," she said. "But I don't think I can cook."

"I'll order," he said.

They ate Chinese on the couch in mostly comfortable silence, each processing the day.

After dinner, Marianne yawned.

"I need sleep," she admitted. "I haven't slept right in days."

"Stay here tonight," Hernando said. "Take my bed. I'll sleep on the couch."

She shook her head.

"I don't want you on the couch. And I don't want to sleep alone."

She met his eyes with total vulnerability.

"Can you just… hold me? That's all. I just need to feel safe."

His chest tightened.

"Of course."

They got ready for bed. He lent her a shirt that hung on her like a dress; she laughed when she saw herself.

"I look like a little girl playing in her dad's closet."

"You look perfect," he said.

They lay down. Marianne curled against his chest as if she'd always fit there. He wrapped his arms around her.

"Thank you," she murmured in the dark. "For everything."

"You don't owe me thanks," he said, kissing her forehead. "Just sleep. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere."

For the first time in days, she believed it—and slept.

Three months later, after that murky dawn when Marianne had shown up at Hernando's door with a gift and a mortal wound to her pride—after the kidnapping, the threats, the confessions, the corpses of guilt floating up from the lagoon of denial—they were living together.

Not out of need, dependency, or sexual urgency, but from that rare impulse of people who have survived storms and discover that, suspicious as it feels, calm can also be home.

The apartment had changed. It wasn't sentimental or marital, but it bore the marks of two lives intertwined: two coffee cups with dried rings on top of a Deleuze book; Marianne's scarf thrown over the couch; Hernando's shirt hanging on a chair; an open Portuguese dictionary beside a topographical map; the faint scent of the jasmine spray Marianne used at night. Nothing suggested perfection. Everything suggested life.

The night was unusually clear. Bucaramanga, with its glowing hills and electrical chaos, looked like a scale model floating in a thick broth of humidity and warm wind.

On the terrace, Marianne poured wine with slow, deliberate movements. Hernando cut bread with the calm of someone who has finally stopped running.

He broke the silence.

"Did you read today's paper?"

"No," she said. "What happened?"

He unfolded it and pointed at a headline that read like fiction:

Former militiaman known as 'Riakola' sentenced to 15 years.

Marianne felt her stomach drop.

"He confessed to everything?" she asked.

"Everything," Hernando said. "The bomb collar, working with Cifuentes, the ELV heists, kidnapping, attempted murder. The judge cut his sentence for cooperation, but he's still not seeing the street for years. Maybe never."

She let that settle.

"I feel sorry for him," she admitted. "He was a broken man."

Hernando nodded slowly.

"Yeah. But he was dangerous. He crossed lines you can't cross. Even if you understand, even if it hurts, you know prison's the only place he won't keep wrecking lives."

Marianne took a long drink.

"I know. It's just… there's this moral vertigo, this question mark about whether justice is ever really fair."

"That doubt is exactly what makes you better than him," Hernando said. "Monsters never doubt. People do."

She gave a tired smile.

"Any news about Nancy?" she asked later.

He set the paper aside like a weight he no longer needed.

"She wrote a couple weeks ago. She's in Bogotá, working at a law firm. Seeing someone. Sounds… okay. Better."

"I'm glad," Marianne said—and meant it. "She deserved a second chance too."

"We all did," Hernando replied.

The city flickered below. The wind carried the buzz of a motorcycle, the growl of an old bus, the hum of a transformer. Sounds that once signaled danger were now just background noise.

"You know what's ironic?" Marianne said, turning her glass. "All those years studying ethics, love, responsibility, the moral structure of desire… and in the end, none of it matters if you don't live through error, collapse, contradiction."

"Theories are good for writing books," Hernando said. "Life's good for writing scars."

She rested her head on his shoulder. It wasn't a pose; it was instinct.

"And what did *you* learn?" she whispered.

He studied the city, then said, without drama:

"I don't want to be a man who runs anymore. No double life. No more wars I never asked for. With you…"—he drew a breath—"…I want to try being a decent man for the first time."

Marianne lifted her face and kissed him—a long, calm kiss that tasted like redemption, not escape.

The night breeze ruffled their hair. The city lights blinked. A dog barked somewhere below. The moment was simple, but real.

"And your insecurities?" Hernando asked gently. "That morning when you saw Nancy… you said you thought you couldn't compete with her body."

Marianne laughed softly.

"It was stupid, I know. But seeing her curves, and then seeing myself—so square, so straight—I thought maybe men would always pick her kind of body."

Hernando turned her to face him.

"Listen to me carefully," he said. "I didn't choose you for your body. And I didn't leave Nancy for hers. I chose you because when I talk to you, I finally feel understood. Because you make me want to be better. Because with you I don't have to pretend."

He paused.

"And about your body… I love it exactly the way it is. I love your straight shoulders, your firm skin, your small, perfect breasts. I love *all* of you. You don't need curves to be beautiful. You already are."

Tears stung her eyes—this time, tears of release.

"Thank you," she whispered. "I needed to hear that."

"You should hear it every day," he said. "And if I have to say it every morning until you believe it, I will."

They kissed again, longer, letting the wine warm, letting the city spin without them.

At the University Hospital of Santander, night seemed in no hurry to leave.

Ariadna walked through the garden beside Emeterio and their two daughters. Trees cast deep shadows; crickets chirped; the faint smell of disinfectant floated from nearby wards.

She'd been in the psychiatric wing for three weeks, under intensive treatment for the psychotic break that had nearly destroyed her family. The meds were working: fewer hallucinations, softer paranoia. For the first time in months, she could look at her husband without seeing a conspirator.

"The girls miss you at home," Emeterio said, holding her hand

carefully, as if she might shatter.

"I miss them too," Ariadna answered with a sad smile. "But the doctor says I need to stay a bit longer. To make sure… it doesn't happen again."

Camila ran up and hugged her around the waist.

"Mom, when are you coming home?"

Ariadna smoothed her hair, eyes filling.

"Soon, honey. Very soon."

Emeterio watched his wife and daughters and felt gratitude and shame knot in his chest. Grateful he'd been stopped in time. Ashamed he'd been inches from becoming a murderer. That morning, after leaving the airport lot with shaking hands and a shredded soul, he'd gone home, hugged Elcira, and begged her forgiveness. She'd cried with relief.

"Don Emeterio," she'd said, "you're not a violent man. You're a good man who almost made a terrible mistake. Something stopped you, or someone. Be thankful for that every day you have left."

Now, walking through the hospital garden, he finally understood something basic: real love isn't possession, control, surveillance, or punishment for imagined sins. Real love is care, patience, and staying—even when the person you love is sick and throwing knives of paranoia in all directions.

"I love you," he blurted suddenly to Ariadna, the words truer than they'd been in years.

She looked at him, surprised, then smiled.

"I love you too," she said. "And thank you for not giving up on me. For not believing all those horrible things I said when I was… when I wasn't myself."

"You were always you," he said. "The illness just got in the way. But I knew you were in there, waiting to come back."

Their daughters ran ahead, chasing fireflies under the garden lights, anchors dragging their parents back to what mattered.

Emeterio thought of Hernando—the man he'd nearly killed over a fantasy. Thought of how, without knowing it, Hernando had never been an enemy, just another human wrestling his own storms.

Someday, he thought, he should find that man and ask forgiveness. Not with speeches, just with the truth: *I was wrong. I projected my fears onto you. And I'm deeply sorry.*

For now, this was enough: his wife alive, his daughters laughing, himself slowly choosing to be the man he wanted to be instead of the monster he'd almost become.

Night stretched over the hospital, calm and patient, waiting—as always—for dawn: new chances, new mistakes, new redemptions.

Somewhere in the same city, other lives went on: Jerónimo and Nohora piecing together love from the rubble of a war that should never have existed; Riakola rotting in a cell, finally caught by his own crimes; Schwerter and Joel slipping back into the shadows, veterans of forgotten wars looking for one last mission to justify their existence.

Lives that had collided for a moment in an airport parking lot now drifted onto different, uncertain paths.

But in Hernando's apartment, under a rare, clear sky over Bucaramanga, two people who'd survived chaos finally found what they'd been searching for unknowingly: not perfection, not a painless life, but mutual presence in the middle of imperfection.

And that, they discovered, was more than enough.

The city breathed around them—alive, chaotic, violent, beautiful, impossible to fully understand and impossible to abandon. A city of contradictions, like its people, like anyone trying to build something lasting on shaky ground.

While the lights flickered in the distance and the wind carried the smell of rain that never fell, Hernando and Marianne stayed on the terrace, bodies pressed together, hearts beating the same uneven rhythm, future uncertain but shared.

Life, they decided without words, was worth living like that.

Together.

12. *The Consultation*

ays later, in Bucaramanga's most renowned psychiatric clinic, Ariadna lay reclining on the worn leather couch. The same office across from Parque de las Palmas where, weeks earlier, Hernando had heard the theory that had left him so disturbed.

Dr. Yasmin Haddad's voice rose with professional authority from her chair by the window.

"You suffer from a psycho-emotional deficiency syndrome, Ariadna," she said, taking notes in her notebook. "Your husband told me about your… sexual activity. He said you corroborated it with different lovers, through unrestrained behavior. Freudian psychologists would have previously diagnosed you as a nymphomaniac, wouldn't they?"

Now seated in the armchair facing the oak desk, she felt a pang of humiliation. She had come at Emeterio's insistence, who, after the scandal, had threatened to take her daughters away if she didn't seek "professional help." The term seared itself into her mind like a brand, the same insult her husband hurled at her every time she expressed desire.

"Yes," she admitted, her voice strained. "That's what they told me. That I have a problem, an addiction."

Haddad took off her glasses and cleaned them with a silk handkerchief, a gesture that Ariadna recognized as her ritual before an important statement.

"Starting with the next session, we will begin therapy for your sex addiction," she continued. "It's not pathological in the sense of harming your body, but the disorder you suffer from has found unhealthy relief in promiscuity."

Something inside her contracted. "Promiscuity." Another word that diminished her, that turned her into a clinical diagnosis instead of a woman with a history, with reasons, with pain.

The doctor stood up and walked to the window, gazing at the palm trees swaying in the park. The afternoon sun cast long

shadows across the room.

“However,” she said, and there was a change in her tone, something more contemplative, “I must confess something to you. I’ve been thinking about your case all week since your husband contacted me. And I’ve come to a conclusion that might surprise you.”

Ariadna looked up, curious despite her discomfort.

"What?"

Haddad returned to her chair and leaned forward, adopting that characteristic intensity she used when she was about to reveal a profound interpretation.

“I don't believe you're a nymphomaniac. Not in the traditional clinical sense. In fact, I consider that diagnosis profoundly misguided and, let me say so, misogynistic.”

She blinked, surprised.

“So what do I have?”

“You, Ariadna, are possessed by an archetype. Jung would call it the Wild Woman, or the Dark Goddess. Others might name it Lilith, Adam's first wife who refused to submit and was demonized by patriarchal tradition.”

Ariadna frowned.

"I don't understand."

“Let me explain. You were born into a conservative home, where your father—a strict engineer—and your mother—a resigned housewife—taught you that a woman's role was obedience, decorum, and submission. You married young, to an older man, for convenience, to please your parents. For years you have lived in a passionless marriage, where your husband accuses you of being a 'nymphomaniac' every time you express a normal sexual desire. Am I wrong?”

"No," she admitted, feeling something begin to stir inside her.

“And now, after years of repression, after being reduced to a trophy wife, a devoted mother, a decorative object at her husband's business events, you finally snapped. You had an affair with Hernando Villanueva, a man fifteen years your junior. And when he left you, wounded in your pride, you took revenge. You told your husband, provoking violence that nearly killed the young

man.”

Ariadna felt tears beginning to well up in her eyes.

"It was a mistake. I... I just wanted Emeterio to feel something, even if it was jealousy. I wanted him to realize I exist."

“Exactly,” Haddad said. “And therein lies the key. You are not an out-of-control person. You are a woman who has been systematically denied, silenced, judged for having perfectly normal desires. The Wild Woman manifested in you as a rebellion against years of oppression. Your affairs are not a symptom of addiction, but of existential hunger. A hunger to be seen, desired, valued as a whole human being, not just as a mother or wife.”

Something broke inside her. Tears began to roll down her cheeks.

“But then... why did I do it? Why did I sleep with him if I knew he was devastated by Nancy?”

Haddad leaned back, choosing her words carefully.

"Because this force, when it manifests after years of repression, is neither selective nor moral. It is pure life energy. You saw in that man something your husband never gave you: vulnerability, emotional depth, genuine desire. Hernando desired you not as a status symbol, but as a woman. And you, hungry for that validation, took what you could. But when he abandoned you—because in the end, he was still in love with Nancy—the archetype became your shadow. The Goddess transformed into the Vengeful One."

“And what does that mean?”

“It means your reaction wasn't rational. It was primal. Like Medea killing her own children to punish Jason. Like Clytemnestra murdering Agamemnon. Like all the betrayed women in mythology who became monsters because patriarchal society had reduced them to possessions, and when they rebelled, they were called crazy, nymphomaniacs, hysterics.”

She covered her face with her hands, sobbing.

“But they almost killed him. Emeterio and his men almost killed him. And it was all my fault.”

“No,” Haddad said firmly. “It was the fault of a system that represses female sexuality, that pathologizes it, that turns it into a

symptom when it should be celebrated as an expression of life. You, Ariadna, are not the problem. The problem is a world that taught you to be ashamed of your desires."

There was a long silence. Outside, in the park, the children were playing. Life went on, indifferent to the pain concentrated in that doctor's office.

"But doctor," Ariadna finally said, wiping away her tears, "that doesn't explain why I felt so alive with him. Why I needed that intensity."

Haddad smiled sadly.

"Because you, like him, are trapped in a romantic pattern. He is the Suffering Lover, obsessed with the woman who left him. You are the Wild Woman, seeking freedom through transgression. You both met at the perfect time: he needed to forget, you needed to feel alive. But neither of you was truly present. You didn't love each other; you loved what the other represented. He saw in you an escape from pain. You saw in him the youth and passion that your marriage had denied you."

"So what am I supposed to do now?"

The doctor stood up and walked to the bookshelf, where she took a copy of "Women Who Run With the Wolves" by Clarissa Pinkola Estés.

"You must read this," she said, handing it to her. "And you must understand something fundamental: this force is not your enemy. It is your ally. But you must learn to consciously channel it, not let it dominate you. Jung called this 'individuation': integrating these energies instead of being controlled by them."

"And my marriage?"

"That's a decision only you can make. But let me tell you something: staying in a dead-end marriage for the sake of your daughters isn't noble, it's cowardly. Your daughters will learn from you what it means to be a woman. Do you want to teach them resignation and repression, or do you want to teach them autonomy and authenticity?"

Those words pierced her like a spear.

"But your theory, doctor... is interesting, almost poetic. But it doesn't entirely convince me."

Haddad looked at her curiously.

"Why not?"

"Because it makes everything seem inevitable. As if I were a puppet of unconscious forces. As if I bore no responsibility for what I did. But I am responsible. I hurt Hernando. He was almost killed because of me. I betrayed my husband, even though he never truly loved me. That's not an archetype, Doctor. Those are choices. Bad choices that I made."

Haddad smiled, and for the first time in the session, her expression was one of genuine respect.

"You're right. Archetypes explain the pattern of behavior, but they don't eliminate individual responsibility. You made those choices. And now you must live with the consequences. But recognizing the pattern allows you to choose consciously in the future, instead of being swept along by forces you don't understand."

"What if I don't want to be the Wild Woman? What if I just want to be... Ariadna?"

"Then," she said, "you have to discover who Ariadna is without the roles that have been imposed on you: without being the obedient daughter, without being the trophy wife, without being the forbidden lover. Who are you when no one is watching?"

She remained silent, contemplating that question she had never asked herself in forty years of life.

"I don't know," she finally admitted.

"That, Ariadna, is the most honest answer you've given today. And finding the true answer will take you years. Perhaps a lifetime."

The session ended with the sound of cicadas announcing twilight. Ariadna left the building with the book under her arm and crossed over to Parque de las Palmas. She sat on a bench, the same one where Hernando had been sitting weeks before, though she didn't know it.

She watched couples strolling, families with children, and elderly people feeding pigeons. Normal life. Life without drama.

She considered Haddad's theory. It was seductive, almost liberating: she would no longer be a sick nymphomaniac, but a

woman possessed by an archetype of rebellion against oppression. But something within her resisted that explanation. It was too convenient, too exculpatory.

"No," she thought, "I decided to sleep with Hernando. I decided to tell Emeterio. I decided all of this. And I have to take responsibility."

But deep down, somewhere deep in her psyche, the Wild Woman howled, chained but not defeated, waiting for the moment to be free again.

That night, while Emeterio slept in the next room—they now slept separately since the scandal—Ariadna opened the book Haddad had given her and read:

"When a woman reclaims her wild nature, she begins to shine with a light that needs no one's approval."

She closed the book and looked out the window at the lights of Bucaramanga. Somewhere in that city, Hernando was probably drunk, writing poems to Nancy. Elsewhere, Nancy was living her new life in Medellín, oblivious to the chaos she had left behind.

And she was here, caught between the archetype and the woman, between rebellion and responsibility, between the Wild Woman and Ariadna.

She didn't know which of the two would win.

But for the first time in years, she realized that the battle existed.

That night, back home, while Emeterio slept in the next room—they now slept separately since the scandal—Ariadna sat at her desk and opened her diary. Haddad's words echoed in her mind like a disturbing sound. She picked up a pen and began to write, not polished verses like Hernando's, but raw, fragmented thoughts:

Ariadna smiled as a storm rose, her shoulder against her cheek. She pulled a sheet of paper from her briefcase and began listing all the lovers who had passed through her life, but she was almost there.

I worry: I'm not living in a madness, yes, I have some knowledge, but also many doubts about where I went wrong, and my husband didn't let me; and if I go to bed looking for a stable marriage, but I'll cry later. I worry: not unconditionally, I dealt with the scandal of the lover, and I can only go to bed so that they

strengthen themselves; and those they love. Around me, I know that life isn't easy with the economic situation we live in. My mother is from the USA, she needs stability and for the girls to study in a good school and find good foreign universities; I know that now my relationships are things. I call Rick the fake lover, only because he's kind with his phrases: imaginary, what would they say about him? Well, Rick is American, so I love him, he invited me to his cabin outside of Cleveland. I met him on a social network for singles. I'm crazy about traveling with him all over America. Here, my salutes, if one travels first. I haven't left this city in two years, and it's getting to me. Yesterday, I even felt a little lonely realizing that this will be my first Christmas alone. I should know that this big, feisty, very honest, and very sincere Hernando—and that these qualities aren't common in people you meet in this life—if I find him anywhere in Bucaramanga, I'm taking him to my bed right away, even if he's with his new girlfriend. They love him and always keep him in mind, certainly the first one there, despite what happened. I won't give him any. Time won't touch you when you're with Rick: I'm shortening these words and actions; those that raised me, are part of me and who I am. He was happy to have met and loved me; I hope he feels the same way someday. Anyway, Rick is surprised by how much I talk; to think I never knew I could speak so well, but the truth is, Rick doesn't talk much because he doesn't know I'm from another city. Don't despair because you're losing your financier; gain experience and start your own project, because my tower has already failed, because what's typical for you is now a psychopath

She laid the pen on the desk and reread what she had written. It was chaos, a fragmented confession that revealed more than she had intended to hide. Rick. Her imaginary lover. A man she had met on a dating website, an American living in Cleveland, who promised her an escape from Bucaramanga, from Emeterio, from this life that was suffocating her.

"What would they say about him?" she wondered. "That he's another symptom of my archetype? That the Wild Woman needs fantasies to survive?"

She thought about Haddad's theory. The archetype of the Wild

Woman. The rebellion against oppression. It had all sounded so convincing in the consulting room, under the golden afternoon light, with the palm trees swaying outside. But here, in the darkness of her bedroom, with Emeterio snoring on the other side of the wall, with her daughters asleep in their rooms, with Rick existing only as words on a screen...

Where was the archetype now? Where was the liberation?

She got up and walked to the window. The lights of Bucaramanga stretched out before her like a sea of trapped fireflies. Somewhere in that city, Hernando was probably drunk, writing perfect poems to Nancy. In Medellín, Nancy was living her new life, oblivious to the chaos. And here she was, trapped between a husband who despised her, a lover who had used her to forget another, and an American ghost who promised her a life that would never come.

She grabbed the book Haddad had given her, "Women Who Run With the Wolves," and hurled it against the wall in barely contained rage. The muffled crash echoed in the room, but Emeterio didn't wake up.

"I'm not an archetype," she whispered to herself. "I'm a woman who made bad choices. And now I have to live with them."

But even as she said it, she knew it was a lie. Or at least, not the whole truth. Because part of her—that wild, untamed part that screamed in the darkness—knew Haddad was right. She had been tamed, caged, judged. And her rebellion, however clumsy and destructive, had been real.

She returned to her desk and on the back of the sheet where she had written her fragmented confession, she wrote one last verse, clearer this time:

The psychologist says I am an archetype, a wild force in chains,
that my hunger is not a vice but a cry, a rebellion of a domesticated woman.

But I know that I chose every kiss, every betrayal, every lie, and
although the archetype explains the process, it does not erase the
guilt that lacerates and sighs within me.

Rick is a ghost I invented on the net, Hernando a mistake I paid
for with violence, Emeterio a prison I chose out of mercy, and I...

barely a shadow without innocence.

Am I Lilith fleeing the patriarchal Eden, or simply a woman who strayed from the path? Perhaps both, perhaps neither in the end, just Ariadna lost in her destiny.

She folded the paper and put it in her desk drawer, next to the old photos from when she was young and dreamed of a different life.

She turned off the light and got into bed. In the darkness, the Wild Woman howled, but Ariadna no longer knew whether she wanted to listen to her or silence her forever.

Perhaps, she thought before falling asleep, the real tragedy was not being possessed by an archetype, but discovering that even archetypes can fail, that even rebellions can end in nothing, that even the Wild Woman can end up caged again, but this time by her own decisions.

And in that final thought, between sleep and wakefulness, Ariadna wondered if she had ever been free, or if her whole life had been just a series of increasingly smaller cages, each one chosen with the illusion of escape.

There was no answer in the darkness.

Only Emeterio's snoring, the silence of her daughters, and the ghostly echo of Rick promising her a life that would never exist.

Haddad read her notes at the next session.

“Excellent work.”

“That's how I feel like I'm forgetting about Hernando. Thank you, doctor.”

“You must write a poem by tomorrow.”

“I already did it, doctor.”

“You are an extraordinary woman! Recite it to me.”

Ariadna stood up, and facing the tops of the palm trees, she said with tears on her cheeks, that poem that Hernando had recited to her while he possessed her in his arms:

The hopeful ones

The Hopeful Ones
The hopeful remain silent.

Illusion is the most precise cry,
He who builds worlds in the void,
the most stubborn, the most necessary.

The hopeful ones plunge their hands
into the mud of an uncertain future,
And yet they till, they sow,
They water with sweat what does not exist.

Their reason screams at them that it is useless,
But they, stubborn as ever, advance.
because they know that in the attempt
The only truth that matters is already here.

Those who are hopeful don't sleep,
not out of fear of worms,
but because the light of their project
It burns their eyelids from the inside.

They are the ones who rise up
when everything points to defeat,
those in the darkest crevice
They sow a seed of wonder.

They don't hunt ghosts:
They build bridges over the abyss.
They don't cry for the beautiful life:
They re-cover it at every corner.

Sometimes they can smell it.
from the bread that they haven't yet kneaded,
of the kisses they haven't given,
of the justice that is approaching.

And then they sing, not just between their lips,
but from the depths,
a song made of future,

And they continue, they always continue,
inventing the world.

Proof